The New Criterion

May 2004

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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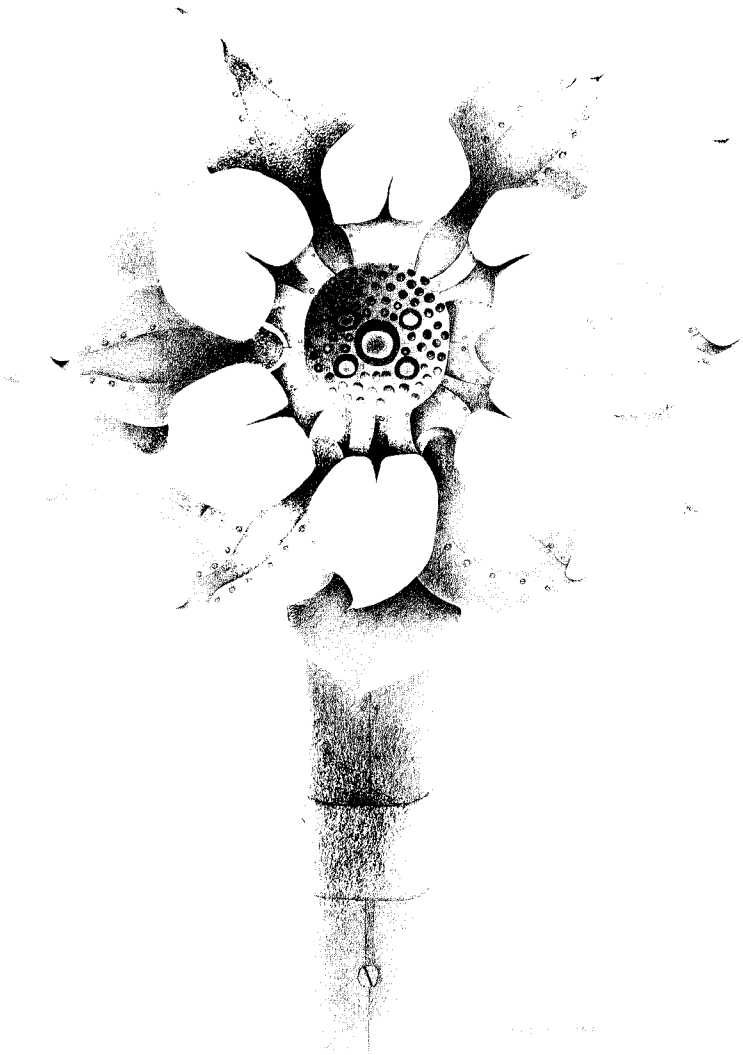

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Self Portrait, 1939, oil on canvas, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

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Notes & Comments: May 2004

A victory for memory

It is said that the first casualty of war is truth. In fact, we believe, memory—that indispensable advocate for historical truth—is the first to go. In war's cataract, momentary crises gobble up our attention absolutely. Last week's bombing, yesterday's atrocity, this morning's defection make it difficult to keep events in perspective. Add a media that is programmatically hostile to the prosecution of war—as the "mainstream media" is to the war in Iraq—and who can remember how we got where we are?

When it comes to Iraq—when it comes to the Middle East generally—one of the greatest aids to memory is Elie Kedourie's great book *The Chatham House Version and Other Middle Eastern Studies*. First published in 1970, this collection of twelve essays was instantly acknowledged as a masterpiece of historical analysis and polemic. Kedourie, who died in 1992 in his middle sixties, hailed from an old and distinguished Jewish family in Baghdad. Dispossessed and exiled after the Second World War, he found refuge in England and was for many years an ornament to the faculty of the London School of Economics. His learning was formidable, his prose style crisp, dry, and disabused. Whatever he turned his attention to he illuminated with the patient light of historical fact. We were amazed—well, to be truthful, we were disappointed but not surprised—to discover last year that *The Chatham House Version* was no longer in print. Another symptom, we thought, of our culture's addiction to amnesia. Kedourie's plangent essay "The Kingdom of Iraq: A Retrospect" is worth about a thousand hours of CNN commentary plus an entire library of *New York Times* reporting. How could this essential volume be out of print?

It may be true, as we have speculated on more than one occasion, that things are always worse than you think. But the validity of that general principle does not mean that there are no bright spots or important recuperative sallies. The fact that the Chicago publisher Ivan R. Dee has just republished *The Chatham House Version* is one such bright spot and victory for memory. This new edition is all the more welcome because it carries an introduction by David Pryce-Jones. As our readers and readers of *National Review* have reason to know, Mr. Pryce-Jones is a writer on Middle Eastern affairs (among much else) whose incisive commentary has made him a worthy heir to Elie Kedourie. If, *per impossibile*, one had to reduce Kedourie's achievement in *The Chatham House Version* to a single theme, a plausible candidate would be the perils, the false promises, of spurious liber-

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ation. Mr. Pryce-Jones underscores this theme in his introduction.

> The British Empire had hitherto been a fixed point of reference in the world, and those who administered it had willingly accepted responsibility for the rule of law and the maintenance of order. The abrupt dismantling of this empire dislocated millions of people, leaving them at the mercy of self-appointed leaders. In one country after another, the achievements of many decades, and sometimes as long as a century or two, were undone in a flash of violence; law and order gave way to dictatorship and tyranny, and graveyards and prisons filled accordingly. And this, according to fashionable opinion-makers in Britain, was liberation, the exciting birth of the Third World.
>
> Given his background in Iraq, Elie Kedourie understood only too well that liberation of this kind was no liberation at all.

We believe that no one can really comprehend the realities of contemporary Iraq without absorbing the admonitory history Elie Kedourie sets forth in his essay on that unfortunate refugee from the British Empire. But the importance of *The Chatham House Version* lies as much in Kedourie's polemic as in his historical analysis. The opening of his essay "Minorities" articulates a sober political truth that even now, several decades into the folly of irresponsible decolonialization, has not been acknowledged by *bien pensants* academics and commentators. "It is the common fashion today," Kedourie observed,

> to denounce the imperialism of western powers in Asia and Africa. Charges of economic exploitation are made and the tyranny and arrogance of the European are arraigned. Yet it is a simple and obvious fact that these areas which are said to suffer from imperialism today have known nothing but alien rule throughout most of their history and that, until the coming of the western powers, their experience of government was the insolence and greed of unchecked arbitrary power.

Alas, "the insolence and greed of unchecked arbitrary power" were again the fates of colonies who rejected the West. "Self-determination" was the slogan; "self-enslavement" or "self-extermination" was often the reality.

Perhaps the greatest part of *The Chatham House Version* is its title essay—"the most devastating polemic," Mr. Pryce-Jones observes, "since the Second World War." "The Chatham House Version" is the name Kedourie gives to a sensibility, a moral orientation, "a whole intellectual style." Kedourie took the phrase from Chatham House, the home of the Royal Institute of International Affairs in St. James's. It was there that, for some thirty years, the historian Arnold Toynbee presided as Director of Studies. And it was from Chatham House that Toynbee promulgated his sentimental effort to enlist history in an effort "to save mankind." It was, Kedourie shows in unsparing detail, an increasingly anti-Western effort. It was also, as the years went by, increasingly anti-Semitic. The West, Toynbee concludes in the last volume of *A Study of History*, "is a perpetual aggressor"—blundering, brutal, arrogant. "I trace the west's arrogance," Toynbee wrote, "back to the Jewish notion of a 'Chosen people.'" It is a doctrine that, though dressed up in the impressive language of academic history, was "essentially simple and familiar." And, Kedourie might have added, perennially popular. Behind it one hears "the shrill and clamant voice of English radicalism, thrilling with self-accusatory and joyful lamentation. *Nostra culpa, Nostra maxima culpa*: we have invaded, we have conquered, we have dominated, we have exploited."

Many pages of *The Chatham House Version* could have been written yesterday. The book's relevance to the current situation is twofold. First, it reminds us of an unpleasant history we have chosen to forget, and without which contemporary events in

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Iraq are unintelligible. It also serves as a salutary warning. The French philosopher Jean-François Revel astringently summed up this aspect of Kedourie's message when he observed that "Democratic civilization is the first in history to blame itself because another power is trying to destroy it." The Chatham House Version encourages that orgy of self-recrimination. Elie Kedourie shows us how culpable is that indulgence in misplaced guilt.

If you pander, they won't come

When it comes to the museum world these days, we have found it prudent to adopt the policy advocated by George Orwell with respect to saints (especially those proposing themselves for sainthood). They should, Orwell wrote, be considered guilty until proven innocent. Orwell enunciated his policy at the beginning of his essay on Mahatma Gandhi, a suitably dubious candidate for sainthood. We advocate a similar attitude when encountering any proposal to expand a museum. Extra vigilance is in order whenever you discover that 1) a new museum is being proposed or 2) the phrases "performance art," "contemporary arts center," or "diversity" occur in the press material for the proposed project.

We were given a vivid reminder of the soundness of extending Orwell's policy about saints when we read about the Brooklyn Museum's $63 million "face lift and modernization" in *The New York Times* last month. To adapt Senator Dirksen, a million here, a million there, and pretty soon we're talking about a real cultural folly. The Brooklyn Museum occupies a stately Beaux-Arts edifice on Prospect Park, enjoys an excellent collection, and is generally still sparsely enough attended to make looking at art there (once you manage to get to Brooklyn) an enjoyable experience. Arnold L. Lehman is determined to change all that.

Mr. Lehman is one of those museum directors who believes that any museum that doesn't have to take lessons in crowd control is a failure. He is also one of those museum directors more interested in buzz than art. It was he who brought the benighted exhibition "Sensation" from London to the Brooklyn Museum, thus reminding us that what was repulsive could also be insupportably boring. Mr. Lehman has now progressed from curatorial frivolity to architectural vandalism. The most obvious aspect of Mr. Lehman's $63 million boondoggle is the huge glass and metal visor he has had affixed to the museum's entrance. True, the Brooklyn Museum has had a long tradition of architectural vandalism. In 1934, the magnificent grand staircase that welcomed visitors was removed for the sake of something far more pedestrian. But that ill-judged venture was nothing compared to the two-story, futuristic Beauborg-meets-shopping-mall contraption clamped on to the building's front like an orthodontic appliance from the land of Brobdingnag. The *Times* reports that the Brooklyn Museum hired an "image consultant" as part of its makeover. It didn't say which one, but clearly they have a nasty sense of humor.

Except for "Sensation," which drew in the politically correct hordes from every borough and beyond, the Brooklyn Museum has had a notoriously hard time attracting visitors. Following the tried and untrue formula, Mr. Lehman kept making the museum's program worse and worse, but still people stayed away. We remember a marvellous exhibition of Edouard Vuillard's work there years ago. But that was long before Mr. Lehman's tenure. Exhibitions devoted to "Star Wars" and "Hip-Hop Nation: Roots, Rhymes and Rage" are more up his street—that and pseudo-transgressive rubbish like "Sensation." Mr. Lehman, doubtless in accordance with some advice from his "image consultant," decided to make a virtue of a liability, ostentatiously

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turning his back (or pretending to do so) on Manhattan in order to concentrate on luring more of the 2.5 million residents of Brooklyn to the museum. As part of this effort, the museum's first exhibition is a disaster called "Open House: Working in Brooklyn." The exhibition consists of some three hundred, um, objects by two hundred Brooklyn artists. It is the usual depressing garbage: lots of "idea" art—that is, art that recycles various trendy clichés—lots of sound effects, video screens, piles of rags, etc., etc. There is even a handrail down one staircase that has sundry vacuous observations printed on it. Out of one window behind the museum is a large area enclosed by a cyclone fence. Inside the fence was piled up detritus left over from the museum's reconstruction: old lighting fixtures, cobblestones and the like. Was it a work of art? We weren't sure and didn't dare ask. In some ways, we hope so, because it was more interesting to look at than anything on the walls or floors of "Open House."

Like us, you probably know several serious artists who live and work in Brooklyn. None was represented in this silly exhibition. A bit of wall text introducing "Open House" described it as "diverse" (translation: the curators got every black, Hispanic, and female artist they could lay their hands on). In fact, though, it is a mind-numbing exercise in artistic homogeneity. It is wholesale, off-the-rack, dime-store, make-believe avant-garde kitsch: the same spirit animates every last pile of rags, every last "challenging" gesture and anti-war, save-the-whales protest. You've been there, done that dozens of times in dozens of museums across the country.

Mr. Lehman managed to garner an enormous amount of advance publicity for his building, his curatorial plans, his new populist insularity. Did it work? We dropped in on the first day the museum was open to the public and could count the number of visitors on the fingers of two hands. People seemed bemused by "Open House." They barely noticed the permanent collection, which is hardly surprising since it is jumbled together without rhyme or reason like items in a flea market. The Brooklyn Museum is particularly strong in its holdings of Egyptian artifacts. But apparently Mr. Lehman did not think mummies and other exotica—including some amazing panel paintings and sculptures—could speak for themselves, for he had emblazoned on the walls irrelevant little snippets about Egypt from a hodgepodge of writers from Sigmund Freud and Mark Twain to Germaine Greer.

One bit of Mr. Lehman's publicity announces that the museum's new goal is to make itself "the most visitor-friendly of any New York art museum." Who knows what Mr. Lehman's image consultant recommended? Doubtless, however, their advice did not come cheap. We have a recommendation we can offer gratis: go back to being an art museum. People do not like being pandered to. They know the difference between a park or emporium and an art museum. They do not want the latter to imitate the former. Good art is enough of a lure for those who are interested in art. Leave the others to their own amusements.

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Lengthened shadows: IX

Olympians on the march: the courts & the culture wars

by Robert H. Bork

[T]o be "reactionary" means nothing more than to believe that in some of its aspects, however secondary, the past was better than the present.
—Leszek Kolakowski

Everything has been said before, but since nobody listens we have to keep going back and beginning all over again.
—André Gide

Walter Bagehot said of the English constitution, "[I]n the full activity of an historical constitution, its subjects repeat phrases true in the time of their fathers, and inculcated by those fathers, but now no longer true." So it is with us. We are living with a vision of a Constitution that no longer exists. The reason is apparent. The Constitution, which is, for all practical purposes, the Supreme Court, follows the elite culture. Thus it is that the liberal transformation of the Constitution over the past fifty years has been accomplished by Courts with heavy majorities appointed by Republican presidents (the current count is seven to two).

As cultural dominance passes from one elite to the next, so does the Supreme Court's law change to reflect the views of the new elite. New values are added and old ones abandoned. Not all values, however, can find even remotely plausible support in the historical Constitution. When vagabond values are to be implemented, the Court's declarations that various executive or legislative acts are unconstitutional are often not even colorably related to the charter supposedly being applied. Disregard for text, legislative purpose, and history confers enormous freedom, so that the Court, employing some primitive and often sophomoric version of moral philosophy or natural law, is at liberty to enforce what it chooses. It is not to be expected that lives devoted to lawyers' arts would, upon the donning of black robes, suddenly produce philosophers. We are then governed not by law but by the moods of an unelected, unrepresentative, and unaccountable committee of nine lawyers. What they decide is often law only in the sense that we will obey their ukases, even when they split five to four and the four have by far the better arguments. What they decide is not law in the sense that it has its origin, its root, in any legal materials and that the result falls within a range that would be regarded as acceptable by most judges, past, present, and future. Moods shift; fair readings do not.

The progression is clear on the record. In the last third of the nineteenth century and the first third of the twentieth, the dominant culture was that of the business class, and the Court often responded with the invention of constitutional rights favorable to that class, striking down reform legislation which, however unwise, was clearly within the constitutional powers of state and federal legislatures. The Court invented, for example, a right to enter into contracts that

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is nowhere to be found in the Constitution. *Lochner* v. *New York*, a 1905 decision, is the classic example. The Court, dividing six to three, struck down a state statute setting maximum hours for bakers as violative of the (nonexistent) right to make contracts. Early New Deal economic regulations were routinely invalidated until a series of retirements and deaths enabled Franklin Roosevelt to remake the Court. The cultural dominance of the business class having been ended by the Great Depression, the new Court freely approved economic regulations and began to prepare the ground for the creation of new rights. An even more momentous shift came with the Court headed by Earl Warren.

The New Deal Court had been philosophically riven. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., has described the Court as it stood in 1947. The wing occupied by Justices Black and Douglas was "concerned with settling particular cases in accordance with their own social preconceptions," a version of "value jurisprudence" identified largely with the Yale law school. Its dominant theme was equality, as shown by its heavy reliance upon the Equal Protection Clause. Schlesinger, Jr. wrote that "Black and Douglas vote less regularly for doctrines than for interests—for the trade union against the employer, for the government against the large taxpayer, for the administrative agency against the business, for the injured workman, for the unprotected defendant, against the patent holder—so that in the phrase of Professor Thomas Reed Powell 'the less favored in life will be the more favored in law.'" This was a flat contradiction of the judicial oath to "administer justice without respect to persons and do equal right to the poor and to the rich." It was as well an expression of the socialist impulse which, significantly, became the regnant outlook of the Court at a time when the American intelligentsia was socialist. As a consequence of the Warren Court's preference for equal results rather than equal justice, it politicized every branch of the law, statutes as well as the Constitution. Ironically, the Court's favored constitutional implement was the clause of the Fourteenth Amendment promising "equal protection of the laws."

Socialism, however, was then discredited. In practice it produced impoverishment and tyranny so that not even intellectuals could cling to its dream, or at least most of them could not do so publicly. Radicalism took the form of the New Left of the 1960s, which gradually grew more interested in personal freedom unrestricted by law, morals, or even the rules of self-preservation (drugs and filthy living conditions were often considered signs of "authenticity"). The New Left practiced a politics of expression and self-absorption. A vision of radical individual autonomy thus lay at the heart of their world view. There was a good deal of that in their intellectual class elders and now it is the dominant mood of the intelligentsia.

It is not too surprising, then, that a mood of radical autonomy or, if you will, moral relativism began to appear in the jurisprudence of the Supreme Court. The Court, in step with the intellectual class, has dropped the socialist drive of the Warren Court. The difference between the two Courts is shown by the differing fates of the two fields I know best, antitrust and constitutional law. The death of the socialist illusion made possible the use of basic economics to return antitrust to rationality. But the rise of moral relativism—perhaps a better term would be moral chaos—drove constitutional law in a new but no more respectable or rational direction.

Today, a lawyer who appears before the Court in a case involving antitrust, taxation, labor law, or a similar question will find his case is typically dealt with in a straightforward, lawyerly manner. But when the Court is presented with a cultural issue in a constitutional context, the Court majority usually departs from the Constitution, often indeed from any conceivable meaning of the Constitution, in order to enact an item on the modern liberal agenda, generally resulting in the enshrinement of radical individual autonomy as part of the Bill of

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Rights. That is signified by the Court's heavy use of the Due Process Clause's guarantee of liberty. To some considerable degree, therefore, it seems valid to say that the current Court is dominated by a gentrified form of Sixties radicalism. I do not know how otherwise to account for the absolute mess of our current jurisprudence of individual rights.

Though the justices are properly criticized for abandoning the proper judicial function to follow intellectual class fecklessness, responsibility for the health of the legal order does not, of course, depend entirely upon judges or even upon a reckless intellectual class. Responsibility rests as well with the practicing bar, the law schools, and, ultimately, with the public that elects or delegates to representatives the election of judges. None of these is performing well or even tolerably. The problems, not all of which may be soluble, lie in the nature of legal practice, the way law is taught, the modern conception of legal scholarship, the ideological direction of the courts, the enormously enlarged area of authority and competence appropriated by those courts, the eagerness of factions to circumvent democracy by litigation, and, finally, public incomprehension of what is and is not in our Constitution and so the public's inability to judge the judges. I have had some experience as a practitioner, professor, government lawyer before the Supreme Court, and judge; doubtless my views are colored by that fact.

When college graduation approached and I was trying to decide on a career, law still recruited the young with prettified images of Holmes and Brandeis. It was Holmes who said that it was possible to live greatly in the law, a rather obscure remark that seemed meaningful at the time. A life in the law seemed to promise battle, require devotion, and reward learning—and what idealistic young man would not choose to be warrior, priest, and scholar? The reality proved to be rather different. Economic pressures have made law less of a profession and more of a business, drastically limiting the role the bar can play in maintaining the integrity of the law. Such concerns necessarily give way to an absorption with billable hours. Though it is not quite true, as a British barrister put it, that success in law depends on the ability to eat sawdust without butter, quite a bit of sawdust-munching is required.

Firms have, moreover, entered an era of giantism. When I joined the largest law firm in Chicago, it had fifty-three lawyers with fewer than a dozen more in a Washington branch. Today the firm has over 450 lawyers in Chicago and well over 900 nationwide, and it is by no means the largest in either category. A firm of fifty-three lawyers today would today be considered practically a boutique operation. Giantism produces an atmosphere more like a corporate headquarters than a partnership. Corporations are not known for a selfless devotion to sound public policy, nor, it turns out, is the practicing bar. That is not a criticism of either business or the bar, but merely a fact that probably cannot be altered.

At one time we were reconciled to the democratic unaccountability of courts by the promise that their powers would be kept within tolerable limits by the informed criticism of the bar. That has not been borne out. Practitioners have provided very little in-depth analyses of major constitutional doctrines; the organized bar has offered none. Attorneys, by and large, have not the time and energy left over from busy practices to study the fields in which the courts operate or to engage in sustained critiques. My practice was primarily in antitrust, but while it was apparent that the law was a doctrinal mess, there was no time to study it as a field; the problems present themselves case by case so that connecting links are not obvious, nor is it in either the client's or the firm's interest to have lawyers spending time on theoretical inquiries that, in any event, a judge is more likely to find irritating than persuasive. It is probably for that reason that the reform of antitrust law, when it occurred, came from the academy rather than

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from the practicing bar. Fields such as constitutional law, which rarely arise in ordinary practice, go almost entirely unexamined. Only ideological litigants, like the ACLU which is devoted to distorting constitutional law in the service of cultural leftism, have any occasion to spend a great deal of time on the subject. Moreover, since their success depends on judges, very few lawyers are willing to risk criticizing them.

At one time we were reconciled to the democratic unaccountability of courts by the promise that their powers would be kept within tolerable limits by the informed criticism of the bar. That has not been borne out.

Bar politicians, leaders of the American Bar Association, for example, find it congenial to hobnob with judges and defend them from criticism. (The ABA, while it engages in professional training to some extent, is increasingly a culturally liberal political organization rather than a professional one, passing resolutions favoring a right to abortion, racial preferences, a universal right to food, AIDS needle-exchange programs, campaign finance reform, and opposing laws regulating sexual conduct between adults.) Its presidents make statements favoring judicial activism. Rather than providing an informed critique of the courts' performance, the ABA is a cheerleader for some of the worst tendencies of modern jurisprudence.

The exigencies of law practice discourage inquiries that have no immediate practical use. The last thing an advocate wants to tell a judge is that the case at bar presents a profound, or even a moderately interesting, question. That would suggest the case could be decided either way. His case, the lawyer must say, with every appearance of sincerity, is clear, so simple that it is hardly worth discussing, and must obviously be decided in favor of his client. The cases he cites are controlling whereas those mistakenly, and perhaps disingenuously, relied upon by his opponent are wide of the mark. So, too, with respect to policy arguments and hypothetical instances, both relied upon to show that only beneficial results will follow from accepting his position while his adversary's contentions would plunge the law into chaos and black night. It can be an exhilarating game, but some lawyers eventually find its repetition turns into drudgery. If they are lucky, they find alternatives.

While the time had come to leave the practice, I do not regret in the slightest the eight years I spent there. There was a great deal of satisfaction in winning, the excitement of the contest, the tactical maneuvering, and the camaraderie of a team working on high-stakes and difficult cases. There was the night of the "lost chord" when at 4 A.M. a colleague at last found the perfect precedent for our side and slapped the book triumphantly back on the shelf. We went down the hall for a celebratory coffee, only to discover, upon returning to the library, that we never could find that case again. Or the night in the conference room when I looked up from drafting a difficult paragraph, found that my colleague had disappeared, and finally located him sleeping on the floor underneath the table. There was the romanticism (I don't know how else to put it) of leaving the office in the first gray light before dawn, the old stone buildings of Chicago just beginning to emerge from the blackness beyond the reach of the street lamps, catching a rare cab on Michigan Boulevard to go home to Hyde Park, shower, shave, put on fresh clothes, and, my wife and children still asleep, return downtown for another day's work.

Ultimately, however, that was not the intellectual life the law had seemed to promise. Litigation is a plastic art; only those who were involved remember it at all. Like working a crossword puzzle, it is absorbing while you are doing it, but, when it is done, there is nothing left. In the days

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and nights, for weeks on end, that a friend and I spent writing and endlessly rewriting a brief about a now-forgotten trust estate worth many millions, we could have produced, I flatter myself, a book of some worth. In the long run, however, the real value of practice to me was that I learned how the court system works. Too many students and professors are inclined to view judges, particularly Supreme Court justices, as philosopher kings. Some experience trying to persuade judges would disabuse the professors, and hence their students, of that notion.

In seeking an academic position, I discovered that eight years of practice made me highly suspect. Some professors apparently thought former practitioners would tell war stories about their cases and teach students how to schmooze with the court clerk. Yale, however, with whatever reservations, appointed me to its law faculty, for which I will always be grateful. The first five years, until the student radicals arrived, were the best years of my professional life. The students were bright and argumentative. Ward Bowman, an economist, provided invaluable discussions about antitrust. Alexander Bickel—whom I count as the best friend I ever had—was equally important to my development of a theory of constitutional interpretation, though we disagreed about it. Together, we taught a seminar in Constitution Theory. Influenced by John Stuart Mill and extrapolating from *Griswold* v. *Connecticut*, the original right of privacy case, I made the preposterous argument that the only harm government should be permitted to prevent was physical injury. Bickel said, "What if I engage in indecent exposure?" I replied that the law already had a doctrine to deal with that. "What doctrine?," Bickel asked. "De minimis non curat lex—the law does not take cognizance of trifles." That was the only time in a long relationship that he was silenced for a minute.

Bickel emphasized tradition as the only effective curb on courts. His judicial philosophy, I told our class on the First Amendment, was a combination of Edmund Burke and *Fiddler on the Roof*. That one he liked. He recognized, however, that the Warren Court had shattered whatever tradition there was left to lean upon. I, in contrast, was searching for a firm theory of when government was permitted to coerce and when it was not. Both of us, I now think, were wrong. The tradition, such as it was, is now gone forever, and I came to realize that Lord Patrick Devlin was right: "it is not possible to set theoretical limits to the power of the State to legislate against immorality."

Teaching is the best way to learn an entire field of law. Practitioners drill deeply into narrow areas in preparing a case. Academics teach across an entire field. Each has advantages, and, when combined, they nourish each other. When not combined, there is in each the danger of sterility. It is unfortunate that these two branches of the profession view each other with suspicion. It is even more unfortunate that sometimes the suspicion on both sides is justified. The aversion of many professors to those who practiced what the professors were supposedly teaching was astonishing. When I spoke at an appointments committee meeting against hiring young men and women just out of school or clerkships, I was met with stony expressions; nobody on the committee and few on the faculty had more than trivial experience with the day-to-day operation of the law. One exceptionally able student, urged to join the faculty, said he would like two or three years of experience first. He was told not to waste his time.

The insularity of legal academia has become a major problem. Many articles published in major law reviews are of no use to practitioners or judges but consist of philosophical exercises (at which law professors are not very good), often on the trilogy familiar in the humanities—race, sex, and class. Some prestigious law schools actually award tenure to those who write stories bereft of any legal analysis about the anguish of living in an oppressive society. It may be tempting to view such follies as no more than raw material for another *Lucky Jim*, but the situation is serious. Many law

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students are ill-prepared for their careers and potentially dangerous to their clients; they must be socialized and in some cases educated by the law firms that hire them.

Working in tandem with this distrust of professionalism is the strong liberal bias of law faculties. One professor said to another, with the intent that I should overhear, that it was the "shame of the law school" that it had two Republicans when no other department at Yale had any. Two out of about thirty-five was, in his view, too many by two, but he was wrong about the rest of the university: aside from the two excrescences in the law school, there was one other admitted Republican on Yale's faculty of two thousand. There surely must have been more, but they had the sense to keep their heads down.

I would not overstate the matter. There were professors who offered professional training and maintained good relationships with the practicing bar. Nor do I do wish to give the impression that I was in any way ill-treated. Most of the faculty, if somewhat bemused by finding a conservative in their midst, were friendly and willing to hear, if not to adopt, nonliberal views. The problem was that ideas and attitudes were clustered at one end of the spectrum. Students were not exposed to the full range of opinion about law. The addition of former student radicals to faculties, moralistic men and women with harder ideological edges, seems at many schools to have made the few conservatives actually beleaguered. That is particularly true, though not exclusively so, of those who teach and write about constitutional law.

My tenure at Yale was interrupted by service as solicitor general of the United States. The solicitor general must approve any government appeals from adverse decisions in any court, federal, state, or local, and also, along with members of a relatively small staff, argues government cases in the Supreme Court. Contrary to what might be supposed, the Supreme Court is the most enjoyable court to argue before. The justices are prepared and engage in lively questioning. Not all courts are like that. There are few more disheartening experiences than arguing for half an hour or more to a judge who has not read the briefs and who sits silent and impassive throughout.

The solicitor general necessarily comes to know the justices' tendencies and abilities very well. There was then, as there is today, a wide range in both characteristics. Justice Byron White was perhaps the quickest intellectually, often seeing the point well before the advocate got to it. At the other end of that spectrum was Justice Harry Blackmun. The most ideological justice was probably William J. Brennan, Jr., who was also the most charming and friendly member, though his view of the judicial function was as different from my own as could be. He was the real leader of the Court in its adoption of deplorable tendencies. He was an affable man whose compelling attractiveness undoubtedly accounted for much of his influence with other justices. It seems likely that Brennan played a major role in converting Earl Warren, whose strong point was not conceptual thinking, from a moderate conservative into a judicial radical.

Robert Nisbet, a particularly insightful observer, stated the ideological situation in the law schools and the judiciary somewhat dramatically but with considerable accuracy:

> The crusading and coercing roles of the Supreme Court and the federal judiciary . . . have created a new and important model for all those whose primary aim is the wholesale reconstruction of American society. . . . There are more and more judges, more and more lawyers, and more and more law students and professors who have entered easily into a state of mind that sees in the Supreme Court precisely what Rousseau saw in his archetypical legislators and Bentham in his omnipotent magistrate: sovereign forces for permanent revolution.

The ideological movement of constitutional law can be gauged by the changes in the casebooks used in the law schools.

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When I began teaching the subject in 1964, most of the casebooks concerned the structural features of the Constitution—separation of powers, federalism, the scope of Congress's and the President's powers, the legitimacy and rationale of judicial supremacy, and so on. Cases involving the Bill of Rights took up less than half the book. Indeed, to a modern reader, it is amazing that in Joseph Story's *Commentaries on the Constitution of the United States*, written in 1833, the discussion of the first ten amendments, the Bill of Rights, occupies about one-fiftieth of the pages. In truth, the Bill of Rights, supplemented after the Civil War by the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteeing due process of law and the equal protection of the laws against incursions by state government, did not generate many cases until well into the twentieth century. The pace picked up with the Warren Court and has not slackened since. In the 1997 edition of a leading constitutional law casebook, Bill of Rights cases took up almost four times the space given to the structural Constitution, signifying an enormous shift from interest in the processes of government to the rights of individuals. The Bill of Rights took up about 2 percent of Story's *Commentaries* and about 73 percent of the casebook. The American public regards constitutional law as little more than a list of individual rights, and they may be correct.

The reasons for this shift are no doubt various, including the multiplying confrontations of an increasingly pluralistic society. The judicial response has been to multiply rights. The most important reason for present purposes, however, was the 1954 discovery by the Supreme Court that it could order massive social change (the end of government racial discrimination in *Brown* v. *Board of Education*) unrelated, so the Court thought, to the meaning of the Constitution, and could prevail over resistance. I have argued elsewhere that *Brown* could have been justified on constitutional principles, but the crucial fact is that the Court did not think so. Encouraged to improve society further, it went on to ordain other major changes in governmental processes and in cultural and moral matters that were clearly not within the Court's constitutional authority. Thus, as Lino Graglia puts it, "The first and foremost thing to know about constitutional law . . . is that it has very little to do with the Constitution." The unpalatable truth is that the Court is making up the Constitution and has been for many years.

Courts below the Supreme Court have less freedom to legislate large new principles, but judges at any level can be consciously influenced by political considerations and personal predilections. In a case with large political implications, our court clearly lacked jurisdiction, but one judge, while privately admitting that to be so, placed his decision on factual grounds because that would leave him free to decide a future case, as a ruling of lack of jurisdiction would not.

The Court's dominant theme is now radical personal autonomy or moral relativism, signified by its emphasis on the liberty mentioned in the Due Process Clause.

"You never know," he said, "what may come down the pike next." That was lawlessness. A number of other examples come to mind. I have no doubt that my views and temperament influenced my judging, but that is inevitable, and the influence was never conscious. A number of my colleagues on the bench could honestly say the same thing, and there is a great difference between judges who, knowing it impossible to succeed entirely, do their best to eliminate views that have no proper role in reaching decisions and those who actively enforce their prejudices.

Judges belong to the class that John O'Sullivan first identified as "Olympians."

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The political philosopher Kenneth Minogue described the philosophy of this class:

> Olympianism is the project of an intellectual elite that believes that it enjoys superior enlightenment and that its business is to spread this benefit to those living on the lower slopes of human achievement. . . . Olympianism burrowed like a parasite into the most powerful institution of the emerging knowledge economy—the universities.

From there the infection spread to other culture-shaping institutions, most notably the Supreme Court which was accused, justly in my opinion, with reasoning backwards from desired results to spurious rationales. "[T]hat is a reality," Alexander Bickel wrote, "if it be true, on which we cannot allow the edifice of judicial review to be based, for if that is all judges do, then their authority over us is totally intolerable and totally irreconcilable with the theory and practice of political democracy." Yet that is the reality upon which judicial review rests today.

The Court's dominant theme is now radical personal autonomy or moral relativism, signified by its emphasis on the liberty mentioned in the Due Process Clause. That reliance, though repeated scores of times, is utterly illegitimate. The clause was clearly meant to guarantee that no one be deprived of liberty without a fair process; it has nothing to say about a fair substance of the law. History as well as the constitutional text proves that. As John Hart Ely wrote, "there is simply no avoiding the fact that the word that follows 'due' is 'process.' . . . [W]e apparently need periodic reminding that 'substantive due process' is a contradiction in terms—sort of like 'green pastel redness.'" Unfortunately, periodic reminding does no good. The Court continues on its way, judging the substance of laws according to the justices' personal opinions of what liberties we should or should not enjoy. There could be no clearer demonstration that the Court regularly and frequently orders our lives changed with a power it has no legitimate claim to wield.

The question arises, why is the movement of judge-made constitutional law in the direction of extreme personal autonomy? It is, of course, the world view of the Olympians, but it has also come to be a feature of popular culture. Look where you will, autonomy erodes discipline everywhere. Religion is a field in many ways very much like law, and both have heresies that threaten to overcome orthodoxy. The phenomenon of "cafeteria Catholics" is well known: despite the Church's doctrine, Catholic rates of contraceptive use and abortion are about the same as those of Protestants and Jews. When the Episcopal Church ordained a practicing homosexual as a bishop, appeals to scripture were brushed aside with amused disdain. A United Methodist lesbian minister was acquitted in a church trial of the charge that lesbianism was incompatible with Christianity, though it clearly is. The restraints of public decency have been abandoned on cable TV and are losing force on over-the-air TV and radio. No small part of these developments is due to the Court's protection of obscenity and its marginalization of religion. But, equally, no small part of the Court's behavior is due to the culture in which it operates. The real doctrines of the Constitution have no more chance to control the Court than do the real doctrines of the churches to control the behavior of its clergy and parishioners.

And why are legal arguments—in law schools as much as in courts—frequently invested with so much anger, an anger that also suffuses and distorts our politics? Law is unlikely, after all, to develop an intense emotional temperature unrelated to the wider world of political and social discourse. To say that the anger is due to the culture war is accurate but hardly an explanation. An explanation that I find eminently plausible is that there is always a segment of the population, usually the intellectuals, that requires meaning in life. The decline of religion, the loss of its redemptive vision, required a new transcendent principle. The obvious, the only, candidate was socialism.

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Conservatism offers no comparable utopian goal. As Charles Krauthammer points out, the collapse of the socialist ideal has left Olympians with nothing except anger. Anger at the existing state of society was, of course, always an active ingredient in socialism. Some compensation for the loss of socialism is sought by various angry radicals in the extreme versions of feminism, environmentalism, animal rights, racial and gender preferences, homosexual rights, international control of American actions, and other causes. That anger characterizes the Democratic party, which is the party of the Olympians, and the activist groups that are what's left of socialism.

The debate within the Supreme Court is usually, though not always, more genteel, but the same urge to reconstruct a highly imperfect society is apparent. The Supreme Court is enacting a program of radical personal autonomy, indeed moral chaos, piece by piece, creating new and hitherto unsuspected constitutional rights: rights to abortion, homosexual sodomy (and, coming soon, homosexual marriage), freedom from religion in the public square, racial and sexual preferences. None of these is justified by the actual Bill of Rights.

I could easily multiply examples. But the underlying philosophy of the Olympians—if it deserves so dignified a name as "philosophy"—is wonderfully summed up in the famous "mystery passage" that Justice Anthony Kennedy first articulated in an opinion reaffirming the made-up constitutional right to abortion. "These matters," Justice Kennedy wrote for the Court,

> involving the most intimate and personal choices a person may make in a lifetime [abortion, etc.], choices central to personal dignity and autonomy, are central to the liberty protected by the Fourteenth Amendment. *At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.* Beliefs about these matters could not define the attributes of personhood were they formed under compulsion of the State. [emphasis added]

Although this passage instantly attracted some measure of the ridicule it deserved, Justice Kennedy chose to repeat it in *Lawrence* v. *Texas* (2003), which pretends to discover a constitutional right to homosexual sodomy. What other practices, we may wonder, are now "at the heart of liberty"? Kennedy's aria about "the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning," etc., is not simply laughable intellectually; it also tells us something grim about our future, the Court, and a people that supinely accepts such judicial diktats.

Kennedy's rhetoric is loaded with legal and cultural messages. First, and most obviously, the "mystery passage" demonstrates once again that today's Bill of Rights jurisprudence has almost nothing to do with the Bill of Rights. Once more the procedural meaning of the Due Process Clause has been transformed into an unconfined substantive judgment by a majority of the justices. When new rights are not invented out of whole cloth, as in *Lawrence*, real rights are expanded beyond all recognition. The Court is now the Olympians' heavy artillery and panzer divisions in the culture war. The "mystery passage," in particular, and the opinions on social and cultural issues, generally, demonstrate that a majority of the Court is willing to make decisions for which it can offer no intelligible argument. There is thus a sharp decline in intellectual honesty and the integrity of constitutional law. Constitutional law is no longer an intellectual discipline but a series of political impulses. I sometimes feel sorry for the editors of casebooks who accompany each opinion with a series of questions and observations about the doctrines the Court is laying down, modifying, refining, and abandoning. Doctrines don't matter; politics do.

The sanctity of these decisions is not just a litmus test for judicial nominees but an article of faith among Democratic politicians. One of the more dismaying sights of

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the year was all seven candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination standing before a feminist organization obsequiously pledging allegiance to *Roe* v. *Wade*.

In the hands of the Court, radical individualism approaches judicial nihilism.

The Senate Democrats, along with a few Northeastern Republicans, will not confirm any nominee to the Supreme Court, and very few to any federal court, who does not express wholehearted support for that ghastly decision. To almost all Democratic senators, virtually unrestrained judicial activism in the service of the cultural Left has become the "mainstream."

In the hands of the Court, radical individualism approaches judicial nihilism. Since each individual must be permitted to define meaning for himself, it must follow that there is no allowable truth, legal or moral. Yet, as Lord Devlin observed, "What makes a society of any sort is community of ideas, not only political ideas but also ideas about the way its members should behave and govern their lives; these latter ideas are its morals." Partly as a consequence of the Supreme Court's extra-constitutional adventures, we are losing our community of ideas about moral behavior. The result is a species of legal triumphalism: When law has disintegrated the bonds of society, its common moral assumptions, there will be nothing left but law to sustain us, and law alone cannot bear that weight.

Even the sense of the sacred is now a mocked and withered virtue. Today's justices seem to have taken their inspiration from the radically libertarian John Stuart Mill of *On Liberty*—from the Mill, that is, who endorsed the view that "society has no business *as* society to decide anything to be wrong which concerns only the individual." *This* Mill would have applauded the sentiment if not the logic of Kennedy's "mystery passage." As Gerturde Himmelfarb has pointed out, however, there was another, more sober Mill, a Mill who acknowledged that

> In all political societies which have had a durable existence, there has been some fixed point; something which men agreed in holding sacred; which it might or might not be lawful to contest in theory, but which no one could either fear or hope to see shaken in practice. . . . But when the questioning of these fundamental principles is (not an occasional disease but) the habitual condition of the body politic . . . the state is virtually in a position of civil war; and can never long remain free from it in act and fact.

That describes our culture war to a T. Examples of the denigration of the formerly sacred are numerous: the symbol of the American flag, the idea of public decency, the centrality of religion, and even traditional marriage—all are clearly threatened if not, indeed, mortally damaged. Of all the institutions of society, perhaps only the judiciary and, most especially, the Supreme Court is still regarded as sacred. Certainly, a majority of the justices think of the Court that way, and three of them have been explicit about the sacrosanct nature of their office. In *Planned Parenthood* v. *Casey* (1992), three of the five justices who voted to retain a right to abortion wrote of Americans who would be "tested" by following the Court's decision:

> [The American people's] belief in themselves as [a] people [who aspire to live according to the rule of law] is not readily separable from their understanding of the Court invested with the authority to decide their constitutional cases and speak before all others for their constitutional ideals. If the Court's legitimacy should be undermined, then so would the country be in its very ability to see itself through its constitutional ideals.

That the people are "tested" by their willingness to follow the puerile moralizing of judges and that their "belief in themselves" is inextricably bound to their obedience to

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the Court is a piece of hubris that might have been expected to produce a backlash of outrage. That it did not is worth pondering.

Having established virtually unquestioned authority on the domestic front, judges, also without any warrant in the Constitution, appear to be contemplating roles as international statesmen. Justice Stevens, writing for four members of the Court in 1988, relied upon "the views that have been expressed by respected professional organizations, by other nations that share our Anglo-American heritage, and by leading members of the Western European community" to hold it a forbidden cruel and unusual punishment to execute a person for a capital crime committed when he was fifteen years of age. There have been other instances of reliance upon foreign decisions and statutes in interpreting the Constitution of the United States, but perhaps the most intriguing was Justice Steven Breyer's statement in 1999 that he found "useful" decisions concerning allowable delays in executions by the Privy Council of Jamaica, the Supreme Court of India, and the Supreme Court of Zimbabwe. It is puzzling enough to contemplate what decisions handed down by foreign courts in the late twentieth century have to do with an American document written in the late eighteenth century; it passes understanding how the Bill of Rights drafted by James Madison is illuminated by the decisions of judges controlled by Robert Mugabe, the African tyrant and mass murderer.

The citation of foreign decisions in American constitutional opinions may be irritating, but it may also be only window-dressing: the Court would probably reach the same results without the aid of the Supreme Court of Zimbabwe. Still, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor suggests the justices will go further. She said in a recent speech that decisions by the courts of other countries could be persuasive authority in American courts. At a time, she said, when 30 percent of the United States's gross national product is internationally derived, "No institution of government can afford to ignore the rest of the world." It might seem that the one institution of government that *should* ignore the rest of the world is the one that derives its sole authority from a purely domestic source, the United States Constitution. It got worse. Justice O'Connor said the Court had found persuasive an amicus brief submitted by American diplomats saying that their jobs in foreign countries were made difficult by the practice of capital punishment in the United States. Rather than representing us to foreign nations, the diplomats were representing foreign countries in our Court. This internationalizing trend is so delightful to Olympians—though they might draw the line at Zimbabwe—that Linda Greenhouse could write with apparent approval in *The New York Times* that "it is not surprising that the justices have begun to see themselves as participants in a worldwide constitutional conversation." It would be more accurate to say that they are participants in a worldwide constitutional convention.

Perhaps we should have seen this coming. For as Minogue pointed out, "We may define Olympianism as a vision of human betterment to be achieved on a global scale by forging the peoples of the world into a single community based on the universal enjoyment of appropriate human rights. . . . Olympians instruct people, they do not obey them." And Olympians require constitutional courts to make certain their instructions stick. They may succeed. The idea of international law is catnip to some people, particularly to the intelligentsia. They may sell the notion to much of the public because it is often supposed that removing disputes from the arenas of diplomacy and force is to substitute high principle for the clash of crass interests. Those who make and ratify our treaties ought not to place authority in international courts without considering what we know about judges. Added to the usual tendency of courts with vague charters to enlarge their powers beyond anything anticipated by the law writers, there is the additional,

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and insoluble, problem of conflicting national interests and animosities, particularly animosity to the West in general and to the United States in particular. Nevertheless, the process of internationalizing law is taking place in our and in foreign courts without the consent of representative institutions.

In short, what we are witnessing is the homogenization of the constitutional laws of the nations of the West. And, since constitutional law is increasingly made by judges without reference to the actual constitutions they purport to be applying, there is developing an international constitutional common law. That is made possible by the fact that judges in almost all Western nations share Olympian values. Thus, we tend to see indifference or hostility to religion, the embrace of sexual permissiveness, the normalization of homosexuality, the creation of abortion rights, the classification of pornography and extreme vulgarity as protected free speech, hostility to traditional authorities, and special rights for favored ethnic minorities and, often, for women. All this leads to the Balkanization of society and the weakening of social discipline based upon a shared morality. It is difficult to say what the next developments in the judicial reconstruction of society will be. No one could have foreseen many of the developments just listed early in the twentieth century: many were not anticipated even ten or fifteen years ago. Who even a decade ago could have concluded that "homosexual marriage" was a right guaranteed by the Massachusetts state constitution (a document written by John Adams)?

It sometimes seems that there is nothing left for judges to invent. But then one recalls the cautionary tale of the patent office commissioner who resigned in the nineteenth century because he believed all significant inventions had already been made. We may rely upon the apparently endless creativity of judges to continue to find new socially disintegrating rights in various federal, state, and foreign constitutions.

Though it may seem a matter for wonder that the public and its elected representatives accept all this with so little resistance, they are in fact almost completely helpless. Those who devised and ratified the Constitution had no idea what courts could become and so they built no safeguards against imperialistic judges. The framers carefully provided means for Congress to check the President and for the President to restrain Congress, but they provided no means for either of those branches to check the judiciary. Impeachment is utterly impracticable. The Jeffersonians tried that in order to replace the Federalist Supreme Court and failed. Impeachment is almost never successful unless bribery is involved. Some commentators suggest reliance on the congressional power under the Constitution to make exceptions to the Supreme Court's appellate jurisdiction. But even if the Court would accept the subtraction of its authority over a class of cases—and it is by no means certain that it would—the Constitution also provides that jurisdiction over federal constitutional questions lodges in state courts, many of which are at least as activist as the U.S. Court, and neither Congress nor state legislatures could remove it.

Only a draconian response to unconstitutional court decisions remains. The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court has ordered the state's legislature to amend its statutory law to permit homosexual marriage. It is, or should seem, extraordinary that a court should order a legislature to amend and enact laws. The underlying decision is so self-evidently an act of judicial usurpation of the legislative function, and so wrong as a matter of constitutional interpretation, that it might seem that any self-respecting legislature would simply refuse to comply, and if it did comply, that the governor would veto the bill. So accustomed have we become to judicial supremacy, however, that such a course sounds revolutionary. Yet there must be some means of standing up to a court that itself is behaving unconstitutionally in very serious matters.

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The classic hypothetical supposes that in 1860 the southern states had claimed a constitutional right to secede (they would have had a plausible argument) and that the Court, most of whose members were southerners, had agreed and ordered Lincoln to let the states go peacefully. Should Lincoln have obediently removed federal troops from Fort Sumter and ordered the armed forces not to interfere with the secession? The question answers itself. Some issues are too important for courts to determine national policy. We may disagree about which issues are that crucial, but that there must be a line beyond which courts must not go and demand obedience seems incontrovertible. At present, we have no criteria for drawing such lines. The Court has employed the political question doctrine to discipline itself, but that doctrine rests with the discretion of the Court.

It is understandable that no legislature or governor has taken such action in the past. (Lincoln provides an exception. During the Civil War he suspended the writ of habeas corpus before Congress, which alone had the authority to do so, acted to ratify what he had done.) We have become so used to the supremacy of the courts that it might be politically dangerous for legislators to stand against judges. Defying a court's constitutional ruling, moreover, might set a dangerous precedent. The power of courts rests entirely upon moral authority granted by the perception that they stand on principle. Our sense of their fragility and fear of harming their capacity to do good restrains us. Thus the vulnerability of courts paradoxically renders them almost invulnerable. But what has happened in Massachusetts, and is likely to happen nationally, is so outrageous that a stand against an imperialistic court might be popular, and it would certainly be wise, because it would be a last-stand defense of the constitutional order.

The problems with all efforts to rein in runaway courts, including the appointment of restrained judges, are manifold, but two require mention. The first is that there is a large and powerful constituency for activist courts. The Olympians, who control virtually all the means of opinion formation, are also powerful in the Senate and will resist by any means available, including, as they are now demonstrating, the filibuster, to stop any effort to attempt to restrict courts to their proper constitutional function. In that they will be supported by a large portion of the non-Olympian public, which simply does not know what is in the Constitution. The judiciary, and most especially the Supreme Court, is held in higher esteem, with the possible exception of the churches, than any other institution, public or private. And this seems true in all Western nations where judges have acquired the power of judicial review.

One reason, oddly enough, is that the Court is held in high esteem precisely because it is unelected, unrepresentative, and unaccountable—which is to say that the justices are not seen as politicians. To survive and to get anything done, politicians have to make expedient compromises. Judges, or so it is mistakenly believed, are not politicians but men and women of principle, untarnished by compromise. The public does not stop to consider that compromise gives all the players some of what they want while judicial principle usually turns out to be a zero-sum game, and, moreover that the non-elite majority is usually the loser in ideological litigation. The preference for judges over legislators seems to signify a weariness with and distrust of democracy. If so, that is an ominous development and one encouraged by judges who have insisted not only upon their supremacy but upon their superior virtue. The appearance of other authoritarians stronger even than the Court would be an expensive cure for the ills of radical autonomy. We may come at last, though perhaps too late, to see the wisdom of Judge Learned Hand's observation about "the fatuity of the system which grants such powers to men it insists shall be independent of popular control."

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Giovanni Verga's verismo

by Martin Greenberg

. . . il vero
dell' aspra sorte e del depresso loco
che natura ci die.
—Leopardi, *La Ginestra*

Italy, a late united nation, lagged too in producing a modern narrative literature. That had to wait till the twentieth century. She did nevertheless produce two outstanding if very different novelists in the nineteenth century: Alessandro Manzoni, whose *I Promessi Sposi* ("The Betrothed"), written in the 1820s, is a vivid, discursively narrated work of Romantic historism; and Giovanni Verga, writing toward the end of the century, the chief figure of Italian *verismo* and one of the great European realists, though little recognized outside his own country. D. H. Lawrence, who admired both writers and translated three of the latter's books, asked—complained—back in the 1920s: "Who still reads them, even (outside the classroom) in Italy?" You can ask the same question today. In 1947 Visconti made a movie, *La Terra Trema*, out of Verga's *I Malavoglia* (known in English as "The House by the Medlar Tree"), filming it in the very Sicilian fishing village—Aci-Trezza—that is the setting of the novel. Yet the postwar fascination with Italy and the neo-realist Italian movies and novels, for which the realist Verga was an inspiration, didn't make him better known abroad; he remains an obscure figure. This has its good side, because reading Verga is to experience the shock and pleasure of unfamiliar great writing. The big names of nineteenth-century prose narrative come preceded by a marching band of reference, allusion, and criticism; you seem to know them before you know them. But Verga, about whom one has known little or nothing, is news.

Giovanni Verga was born in 1840 into a landowning family in the city of Catania, on the east coast of Sicily, almost in the shadow of Etna. He began to write early. In 1865 he departed for the mainland, first to Florence and then Milan. A young provincial, he was entranced by metropolitan excitements: high society, love affairs, art, journalism, literature. Fashionable life—fashionable sexual life—provided much of the matter for his early efforts as a novelist, which tended toward the insipid. But he hadn't shaken the dust of his native island from his feet. Sicily began to intrude itself into his work. This was a time in which the young writers of Italy, where the old rhetorical traditions were still strong, were responding excitedly to the new ideas of French realism and naturalism exemplified by Flaubert, the Goncourts, and Zola. Especially Zola's example moved Verga (but Verga's realism is not at all Zolaesque). And at the end of the 1870s one of literature's many miracles occurred. A hitherto mediocre writer renounced a shallow subject matter and a traditional style to write a series of vivid,

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violent short stories and two novels about the abysmally poor, primitive Sicilian life in the midst of which he had grown up.

If Verga's realism took its lead from France, that doesn't mean he was a country cousin trailing after "the literary smarties in Paris" (Lawrence's phrase). Verga sounded his own note. Sounded is the right word for a style that echoed his characters' own speech—*was* their own speech. With his laconic narrative art he anticipated a later time; with his peasant stories he echoed as early a time as Boccaccio's. The nineteenth century on the whole was long-winded, slow-paced, descriptive, achieving its masterpieces by a fullness (often fatness) of exposition. That is one way. Verga's was the way of brevity, an intense abruptness striving for absolute impersonality—because any trace of the author's presence was "the mark of original sin." Of course such absolute impersonality is impossible. But a repudiation of the self-delighting fine writing of the Italian rhetorical tradition—that was possible.

Italy before her unification in 1860 was a backward country with a supercivilized past. Her upper classes looked northwards beyond the Alps in emulation of the civilization of northern Europe. And following the Risorgimento she modernized quickly—that is, the Italian north did. Yet what independence and unification revealed was that the south, the glorious south of ancient times, was stuck fast in semi-feudal sloth and squalor. Among the educated classes of the north, two main ways of looking at the south emerged. This is now the subject of an interesting study, *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question*, by Nelson Moe.[1] One way saw the Italian south as fascinatingly picturesque, full of the romantic charm of a remote part of the world left behind by time. The other, realistic way, of which Professor Moe makes out two branches, saw it as almost another country, primitive, nasty, miserable, with Italy south of Naples or even Rome being regarded as where Africa began. This Italian south cried out for modernization. But another kind of realism saw its primitivism as an uncorrupted, more authentic, more vital life. The great Italophile Stendhal praised Italy as a place where greed and generosity, tenderness and violence, passionate love and passionate hatred were still freely expressed; in *The Charterhouse of Parma*, he jeered at his fellow Frenchmen whose civilization had left them only one remaining passion, the one for "money, which gave them the means to strut about importantly." In Italy itself he distinguished between the civilized north and the region south of the Tiber where "you'll find the energy and exuberance of savages." This "question" of the south was a matter of lively discussion in the intellectual circles of Milan in which Verga moved.

He dealt with the question in an early story, "Fantasticheria" (translated by D. H. Lawrence as "Caprice"). It is addressed to a Milanese society lady by the Sicilian narrator who had been her lover-guide on a trip to the island. Her caprice was, when seeing from their railroad car the fishing village of Aci-Trezza, framed like a picture in the train window, to say, How pretty it looks, how nice it would be to spend a month down there. So down they went with her mountain of luggage. In two days' time she was bored to death and left. Close up, Aci-Trezza lost all its picturesque charm. Her lover too couldn't have pleased her much, for with gentle mercilessness he exposes her bourgeois blindness to the humanity of the Sicilian poor, her triviality of mind and occupations.

"Fantasticheria" is less interesting as a story than as an introduction to his remarkable first collection, *Vita dei Campi* ("Life in the Fields"); among these are "The She-Wolf," "Rosso Malpelo," "Ieli [the Herd-boy]" and "Cavalleria Rusticana"—all works taut with Verga's narrative intensity. Three of these four stories end with dire retribu-

1 *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question*, by Nelson Moe; The University of California Press, 394 pages, $50.

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tion for sexual violation. The brilliantly told "She-Wolf" has something of a classical suggestion in its tragic movement. The She-Wolf is called that by the village women because, a kind of maenad with her "arrogant breasts," coal-black eyes, and red lips, always roaming about, she has devoured "all their sons and husbands" and even the village priest, insatiably. The story's few pages, which cover a lot of barely indicated time, don't produce an effect of speed but rather of deliberateness, inexorability—that is, tragedy. Behind the She-Wolf hovers the shadow of the classical-romantic figure of the Fatal Woman: Clytemnestra, Vittoria Corombona, La Belle Dame Sans Merci. The She-Wolf, indeed all the characters, speak an Italian whose colloquialisms and touches of dialect make the language more theirs than the author's. Everything is seen—heard—from close up, in the midst of things; there is no narrative remove. Verga's Italian realism has a lyrical quality. Sometimes Flaubert's realism, sometimes Zola's naturalism are touched with poetry; in Verga it isn't a touch, it's an element. And this poetical element allows freer admittance to the shadow of the Belle Dame lurking behind the She-Wolf, and behind the Belle Dame, Eve, and behind Eve, even farther back, Lilith. A peasant tragedy of carnal love, "The She-Wolf" doesn't lack the emotions of pity and fear. Yet they are muffled by the apparent neutrality of the story's telling, which only adds to its force.

The tragic carnal of "The She-Wolf" changes to the tragic pastoral of "Ieli." This story is told a little less dispassionately because of Verga's fondness for the protagonist, his endearing herdboy, who lives out in the fields with the horses he herds, and whose innocence and goodness go back before the Fall. Thanks to his friendship with Don Alfonso, a gentleman's son, and Mara, a farmer's child, whom Ieli adores, his hard childhood is happy. The three children enjoy an idyllic companionship wandering the countryside. The novella darkens as it moves through the vicissitudes of Ieli's life to culminate in catastrophe. Mara, palmed off as a wife on the guileless, still adoring shepherd (as he now is) because her reputation has been lost for "carrying on" with Don Alfonso, continues to carry on. Such falsehood seems impossible to Ieli. But when he sees Mara walk into the arms of Don Alfonso to dance with him at a sheep-shearing feast, the truth overwhelms him. With a single stroke he cuts Don Alfonso's throat, just as he had cut two kids' throats a minute before for the feast. The few words of the conclusion bring one up short with their revelation of how things that torture our consciousness were self-evident to a simpler time.

Brought before the judge, Ieli says, "What! How shouldn't I have killed him? He'd taken Mara!"

"Tragedy seems to be the cathartic element which is necessary whenever human values must be saved," Giovanni Cecchetti writes in his introduction to his Verga translation, *The She-Wolf and Other Stories* (1973). Nanni, a returned soldier, defends himself and his family—the all important Sicilian family—against the She-Wolf, and against himself, by killing her. Gentle as Ieli is, he kills to expiate a perfidious violation of friendship and marriage. Behind Verga's imperturbability is a warm, a beating heart. That is not the case with Flaubert; behind the objectivity of Zola you find a heart that beats too, but for social justice. Impersonal Verga differs from impersonal Flaubert and impersonal Zola in being, really, personal.

The underlying emotion of these first two stories is pity, tragic pity; of the third, the shattering "Rosso Malpelo," pitifulness. You would think pitifulness less profound than tragic pity, even when it is hardly the pity of a *King Lear*. Yet the infinite sadness of "Rosso Malpelo" is more harrowing than the pity of "The She-Wolf" and "Ieli." But no—I feel that the tragic fury of carnal desire in "The She-Wolf" yields only a little in emotional force to the very different, unpurged desolation of "Rosso Malpelo." The boy whose nickname gives that story its title

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is called *malpelo* ("evil-haired") because he has red hair, and he has red hair because he's wicked and malicious—"an ugly thing, a surly, sullen brat whom everybody avoided, that you gave a kick to when he got too close." The "you" speaking here are the Sicilian villagers whose men go down into an underground quarry to dig sand (as Malpelo and other children do too). It is their voices, a cruel village chorus—and also Malpelo's own voice—that give the story its hard sound: the boy's voice too because he has accepted into himself the village's view of him. "[K]nowing he was *malpelo*, he tried to live up to that name"; if anything went wrong he was to blame, and even if he wasn't he was, because it was just the kind of thing a *malpelo* would do. You see, "I'm *malpelo*," he says, almost boastfully. The only affection ever shown him was by his father, who was called the Jackass and half shut out from the village by contempt, as his son is completely shut out by revulsion and fear. The father, working overtime, dies under a sand fall he should never have exposed himself to, just like a jackass. The people hardly bestir themselves to rescue him. The boy howls with terror and grief, digging the sand like a madman to find his buried parent. The miners have to drag the crazy creature away by his hair.

How simply the story is told. As James Wood writes in an excellent essay, "The Unwinding Stair," it seems to have the simpleness of the unclothed, unselfconscious ages. "Rosso Malpelo" is also not simple. It has a doubleness. There is the surface text, the words of the village chorus, which is betrayed by the under-text. This duplicity isn't always easy to interpret. Professor Moe says that Malpelo is wholly "committed to the . . . violence and oppression in which he lives. There is little that is charming or pleasant about him." Wood, among other, more sympathetic words, says he is "a vicious, pathetic, feral child. . . . Certainly he is nasty."

Cruelly treated, the boy is cruel in turn—or so it seems. Verga turned the story—or I should say its language—over to the villagers. It's the latter's judgment that we hear. When the text uses the third person, it isn't the auctorial third person but the third person of "free indirect discourse," what German aestheticians were the first to identify as *erlebte Rede*: the thoughts, sentiments, intentions, etc., etc., of the characters—here the village collectivity—given in their own words. They are "free" to say how *they* understand things. And their understanding of the filthy, ragged, skulking Malpelo is pitiless. What has lack of *charm* and *pleasantness* got to do with Malpelo's terrible story—or his supposedly being *feral*? He's not the savage one, the people of the village are.

Yes, he beats the poor stumbling pit donkey mercilessly, saying "This way you'll die sooner!" But we come to understand these words better at the end of the story. "He certainly felt a strange pleasure in remembering the ill treatment . . . they had made his father bear, and the way they had let him die." Is it a *strange pleasure* for a son to remember with hatred the abuse suffered by the father he loved, the indifference shown to his fate?

"Out of refined cruelty he seemed to have made himself the protector of a poor little [new] boy," a hobbling cripple whom the miners call the Frog. When the Frog whines under a heavy load, Malpelo scolds and hits him—it is his harsh way of encouraging him to be brave and strong. "Beat the donkey with all your might, as he would beat you if he could," is the kind of advice Malpelo gives Frog. But he also helps Frog with work too hard for him, buys the sickly boy wine and hot soup, carries him on his back, visits him when he is dying. This is what the communal voice calls "*refined cruelty*."

After Gray the donkey had died, Malpelo and Frog went to look at the carcass—a kind of memorial visit. "See those ribs of Gray? Now he doesn't suffer any more. . . . No more! No more! . . . But it would have been better for him if he had never been born." Here Malpelo echoes a sentiment you find expressed from Sophocles to

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Auden. Behind his beating the donkey lurked some kind of thought that he was hastening the kindness of death. "If [Malpelo himself] was beaten, it didn't matter . . . to him, for when he would become like Gray or like Frog, he wouldn't feel anything any more."

Of no account because without family, he is the one sent to explore the mine's perilous winding passages. One day, as he knew must happen, as had happened to others, he doesn't return. Even if he didn't look forward to it, he had accepted that death was an end to suffering. Against the social reality of his world, where man is a wolf to man, Rosso Malpelo, the surly, sullen brat, who loved his father and was kind to poor Frog, had struggled without help, in ignorance, in the only way he knew, to assert human generosity and love.

The communal chorus Verga had discovered as the narrative form for "Rosso Malpelo" he carried over to his novel *I Malavoglia* ("The House by the Medlar Tree") on a greatly enlarged scale. It has a cast of fifty characters, the natives of the poor fishing village of the already mentioned Aci-Trezza. All are individuals with names (and nicknames), have individual voices that shout and whisper, hold forth and denounce, murmur and mutter, wail and weep and laugh—a medley that rises and falls like the sound of the sea at their door. Within this vocal world the novel tells the story of the fall of one family, Malavoglia, overwhelmed by misfortune after misfortune, honorable, well-intentioned people (in contradiction to the "ill will" of their name). Behind Verga's deadpan, you detect a looking back to an older, nobler time, as Leopardi did, in disaffection with "progress."

Italians count *The House by the Medlar Tree* Verga's masterpiece. It is strikingly original in its language and structure. The best translatioin of it that I know is by Raymond Rosenthal (who translated Primo Levi's *Periodic Table* so brilliantly). Yet his English fails, it seems to me, to catch the choral character of *I Malavoglia*. In the Italian the village chorus is literally a chorus, musical, poem-like—so Rosenthal and the Italian critics describe it. But how can English syllables catch that Mediterranean music, flavored with dialect and resounding on almost every page, Sancho Panza-like, with proverbs that are almost impossible to bring over in any true-sounding form? In English what you hear is a confusion of names and voices, cacophonous rather than choral, wearisome even after you learn by rereading to find your way about in it. You can catch a sense of gaiety in the village noisiness, however, and a rough humor.

The pathetic story of the Malavoglia family, in English, teeters on the edge of sentimentality. Lawrence wrote that the novel "is rather overdone on the pitiful side. . . . Just knock off about twenty per cent of the tragedy in *I Malavoglia* and see what a great book remains." What would you knock off first? Certainly the young Malavoglia daughter going wrong in the big city (let her get into some other kind of trouble!); then you would have your choice of smaller bits and pieces. But that would still leave Master 'Ntoni, the patriarchal head of the family, at the center of the novel, and he is a bit of a Mr. Peggotty. In Verga's own language, so Italian critics claim, he is able to avoid sentimentality. Perhaps so—language is crucial with Verga. I don't know enough Italian to have an opinion. And as I can't hear, and therefore feel, and therefore know the novel in its vital vocal texture, I'll cut off my discussion of it here.

Verga followed *The House by the Medlar Tree* with his other major long fiction, the very different *Mastro-Don Gesualdo* (1889). No "choral novel," it tells its story in a more or less familiar nineteenth-century style. And it is different too in its moral feeling. The Malavoglia have the heroism of endurance in the face of misfortune, loss, and poverty. Their ethic of family and work invigorates their struggle to live, gives it emotional and moral purpose. In *Mastro-Don Gesualdo* Verga shifts his attention from

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poor fisher people to the gentry-aristocracy of a rural town. And not a soul among these highborn (or the town's lowborn) has anything the least bit fine or brave about him—or her: what horrors the women are! All is greed, motive- and money-calculation; vanity, envy, and fear. This is Verga's *verismo* (*verità*, the truth) for fair.

Don Gesualdo has climbed up from ragged, hod-carrying poverty to be the richest man in the region. He is a better person than his fellow townsmen, when his greed allows him, but he is undone by marrying into the aristocracy. Of course they despise him. He dies in the end sick and unregarded in the wing of the palazzo of a polite, ice-cold Palermo duke who had married Gesualdo's daughter, or rather his money.

Why should the novel's subject—a Maestro (a skilled worker, Gesualdo had been a stone mason) among the Dons—seem paltry and dreary, though surely interesting enough? Did Verga not have his heart in writing about the gentry? Was it written out of his head, unlike his peasant stories, as the second step in his Zolaesque project (abortive) to achieve a five-novel series that would go up the ladder of Sicilian society? There are flashes of the sun-tortured, stony, glaring Sicilian countryside, and one long-ish episode, when taking refuge from the cholera, in which greenery, flowers, and fruit contest the grayness, not to much avail. There is something, too, repellent about the novel. Not because its people are repellent—a novel with disgusting people can be fascinating; I cite the extreme example of Wolfgang Koeppen's *Death in Rome*. *Mastro-Don Gesualdo* has plenty of truth, *verità*, but truth from which artistic spiritedness, grace, are absent.

Very different, with their highly developed art of simplicity, is his *Novelle Rusticane* ("Country Tale" [1883] or *Little Novels of Sicily* in Lawrence's translation). These, with the stories of *Life in the Fields*, put Verga, I believe, in the front rank of short-story writers. The country tales being mostly about peasants, Verga is at home with his material. One story, however, is about the gentry and begins so:

> They know how to read and write—that's the trouble. The white frost of dark winter dawns and the burning dog days of harvest time fall upon them as upon every other poor devil, since they're made of flesh and blood like their fellow men, and since they've got to go out and watch to see that their fellow man doesn't rob them of his time and his day's pay. But if you have anything to do with them, they hook you by . . . the beak of that pen of theirs, and then you'll never get your name out of their ugly books ever again.

There is no lack of spirit in this writing, maybe because he is writing about gentry fallen into poverty and troubles so that their class brutality has been humbled enough for him to pity them: Don Giovannino is sold up for debt, hiding his face for shame; Don Marco's fields are obliterated by lava pouring down from Etna; Don Piddu finds his dowerless daughter in the arms of a stable boy, and for a second sees his sick wife, magistrates, the police drowning in a "sea of blood." Don Piddu is counselled by his confessor "to offer his [loud] anguish to God." And this provokes the narrator to conclude the story, most unusually, with a comment of his own: "But what the priest should really have said to Don Piddu was: You see, your honor, when the same trouble falls on other poor folks they keep quiet, because they are poor, and can't read and write, and can't let out what they feel without getting sent to the galleys."

"The Gentry," "Malaria," "Property," "Liberty"—if you knew nothing more about them than their titles, you'd think they were essays. Indeed in a certain sense they are: non-dramatic story-essays that arrive through their concrete, realistic matter at a general truth. In "The Gentry" the narrator himself, as we've just seen, speaking as a village priest would speak, points the moral. Such a moralizing of narrative is old, the realism of the representation new.

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In "Property," Mazzarò, once a poor peasant his boss of a baron used to kick in the pants, amasses a huge amount of it (including all of the baron's), hardly pausing even to eat. When old and ailing and reminded to forget property and think about his soul, Mazzarò rushes out into the courtyard like a madman and kills his ducks and turkeys so as to possess them still. He had laid up treasures on earth which resisted the corruption of moth and rust, but not flesh that would resist the corruption of time. Verga doesn't hesitate to find for his tales truths as old as those in the Sermon on the Mount.

Some of these tales seem to me perfection of their kind. "The Orphans" is a masterpiece, of an unsurpassed art of simplicity. It recalls Isaac Babel, but is not outdone by him, not outdone by anyone writing in his mode of narrative. In it the inconsolable Meno has just lost his second wife, a treasure, whose like he'd never find again, who wouldn't let him call the doctor for her, who got up the day before she died to see to the foal just weaned, who didn't wash herself so as not to dirty water, who took care of him like a servant, who loved his little girl by his first wife because she was her niece, and whose dowry he'd have to give back because they'd had no children—was there ever anybody so unfortunate? The women surrounding him try to reassure him but he can't be reassured, they offer him a bite which he can't eat but eats, they are already scheming to find him his third wife (and do). But it is impossible to give an idea of the story's now strong, now subtle shades of feeling, of its significant trivial details, of its calm, pitying, humorous sense of the eternal onward going of human life.

Giuseppe di Lampedusa's *Leopard* claimed to speak for Sicily, eternal Sicily. In Verga's strong light the flimflammery, the clichés, the hoity-toityness of that glittery work seem especially clear.

What kind of realism is Verga's *verismo*? If we apply Erich Auerbach's definition of modern mimesis to him, what do we find? That definition requires three things: the serious treatment of everyday reality; the serious representation of the socially inferior; all shown against the background, as part, of contemporary historical change. Verga's work satisfies the first two requirements, but not the third, of historical fluidity, of a matrix of constant contemporary historical movement. His narratives do have their small indications of the changes taking place in Sicily in the nineteenth century, for example: Garibaldi's red-shirted soldiers who had just overthrown Bourbon rule reestablishing law and order—reestablishing the way things had always been—in a revolted villages as recounted in "Liberty"; or the military conscription instituted by the Piedmontese Victor Emmanuele II, implied in "The She-Wolf" by Nanni's being a returned soldier. Yet these are indirect indications of matters which exist on the periphery of Verga's Sicilian peasant world, to which he gives no weight. What does he give weight to?

Verga was an Italian patriot, liberal in his political sentiments like many another. But unlike many another, as a writer, he ignores all questions of reform, amelioration, politics, desirable social change. His Sicily is eternal, essentially the same under the Piedmontese as under the Bourbons. The peasantry he paints are engaged in the eternal struggle to live of a beset humanity, not Sicilians slowly emerging into the modern world, emigrating to America, forming into parties, soon to die in a world war, etc. etc. His representation of the oppressed Sicilian peasantry isn't liberal-progressive but Christian (and anticlerical, like Boccaccio's). Raymond Rosenthal quotes him as saying that it is "by listening, only listening, that one learns to write." Verga listened, as a genius listens, with a profound commiseration that reached deeper than politics or sociology ever can.

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Milton Avery: then & now

by James Panero

In the new art we can trace two main currents; in one synthesis predominates, in the other analysis; the latter preponderates enormously. Indeed, this is the direction in which abstract art has tended to develop ever since the Renaissance.
—Julius Meier-Graefe, 1908

Why talk when you can paint?
—Milton Avery

My first acquaintance with the work of Milton Avery (1885–1965) was indirect. In Christmas 1982, a color-rich, half-abstract landscape of a mountain scene—a catalogue-cover reproduction of it anyway—landed on my parents' coffee table. At this point, the total understanding of my world encompassed 1) the five blocks around my apartment, 2) the television lineup of Channel Thirteen, and 3) Central Park. To this was added 4) *Red Rock Falls* (1947) from 1982's Avery retrospective, prepared by Barbara Haskell for the Whitney Museum. Avery's waterfall flowed through my childhood with the drip of a bathroom faucet.

Until I started researching a show now at The Phillips Collection[1] (and I found *that* book), the whole experience was a sort of broken memory. There could be worse introductions to art than *Red Rock Falls*, or even its reproduction. Perhaps what I most remember is that I rarely grew tired of it; the ten thousandth glance was as engaging, or as frustrating, as the first. *Red Rock Falls* seems simple, but it refuses to give up its secrets. Depending on what you want art to do, I suppose, this refusal can either be construed as a painting's greatest compliment or its harshest critique.

Red Rock Falls is made up of six fields of color: blue (water), purple (riverbank), brown (cliff), orange (hill), green (mountains), and pink (sky)—the image of the actual painting, which is in the Milwaukee Art Museum, so blends into the memory of my faded, sun-damaged reproduction that you must bear with me. A pattern of cross-hatches—not too regular—runs though the orange and brown regions. The blue varies as the waterfall joins the river, but other than that the colors are creamy and slightly mottled yet distinct from one another. The riverbank relaxes in its purple splendor all the way up to the foothills of the green mountains, which rub against the pink sky. The brown cliffs slip between the orange hill and the blue river.

The shapes tease at one another. The sky presses down on the mountains, which are packed against the hill. The riverbank sprawls out and pokes left into the narrowing river. This river does not so much flow down as shoot up, from lower left to upper

1 "Discovering Milton Avery: Two Devoted Collectors, Louis Kaufman and Duncan Phillips" opened at The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., on February 14 and remains on view through May 16, 2004.

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right. It widens at one corner to form a body that thins into an attenuated neck (choked at its most vulnerable spot by the riverbank). This neck then leads to a head—the waterfall—that sits up and forms the flattest part of the canvas, here in the shape of a C. The notch in the C might be the river flowing around a rock in the cliff face. It might just as well be a mouth, wide open and yelling. (Is it because of the pushy riverbank? Is it shouting over the noise of the falls? Could it be producing the noise of the falls itself?) The brown cliffs hang down around this head like a mat of hair. The red hillside to its left: a fancy veil fluttering in the breeze.

That might be Wednesday. On Thursday, that head could become a hand reaching up to grab the green mountain—or is it holding it back? On Friday, back to the head again, but this time of a monster. Saturday is something different: the river becomes sky as seen though the beak of a tropical bird, a detailed closeup of Toucan Sam facing left, flat as a pancake. And on Sunday? It is a waterfall flowing over red rocks. Such are some conscious impressions. The corners of my eyes have their own, no doubt wilder, thoughts on the matter.

Milton Avery was fond of saying "Why talk when you can paint?" The quip sounds like a toss-off—a Yankee way of shushing the room. But I doubt whether Avery could have offered a more forthright statement about his artistic position. In Avery's case, I think, the reasons went beyond New England reticence. He believed that his paintings said everything he needed to say, and that was that.

There lies a deep urgency in what Avery could create. The passage of time has only helped flesh out these qualities. While much of what seemed avant-garde in the past looks dated, Avery still resonates. The history of art is not a series of facts, of course, but a battleground of styles. How did this play out in the art of the twentieth century? On one side: tone, volume, depth, illusion, narrative, and an art that is as much literary as aesthetic. The opposing style: based in color, spiritual in an entirely different manner (one might say non-evangelical), and rooted most directly in Symbolism, synesthesia, tone poetry, and the art of the 1890s. Here the unity of painting predominates. The interlocking flatness and harmonies of shape and color take precedence over subject matter. The painting itself *is* subject matter. Within this vein, most notably as a colorist, Milton Avery has proved to be a central figure in twentieth-century art.

When Social Realism was riding high in art in the 1930s, Avery once remarked, "Either I am crazy or they are crazy." He might have said the same thing in the 1920s, surrounded by the nativist style of the "American scene"—following the collapse of modernist art as championed by Alfred Stieglitz and Arthur Dove—or in the early 1950s, when his younger disciples, including Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, and Barnett Newman (they all met him in the late 1920s and early 1930s), began writing manifestos to the *Times* and took up pure abstraction. It must speak to an artist's continued relevance when he is supposedly "surpassed" on numerous occasions for completely different reasons.

Avery's laconic disposition and lack of political engagement were often mistaken for simpleness. It is rumored that he never voted. In the late 1930s, he gave up a job in the Easel Division of the Works Progress Administration/Federal Art Project because he resisted signing the obligatory pauper's oath. John Maynard Keynes: no thanks. But Avery was not a social outsider or a naif. He was known for his keen sense of humor. He led what must have been the most stable family life of any artist in the twentieth century, due in no small part to the steadfastness of his wife, Sally. She served as the Averys' breadwinner first by drawing sketches for a publication called *Progressive Grocer* and then, after 1940, as the illustrator for a popular weekly column in the *New York Times Magazine* called "Child and Parent," for which she earned $100 a week. In 1925, the year they met, Avery moved to New

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York. He gave up his odd jobs in manufacturing, third-watch shifts at the Travelers Insurance Company, and the conservative art schools he had been attending around Hartford, Connecticut. In New York he dedicated himself to art full time. He was forty—an artist with no reputation, no money, no means of high-level employment, but he was someone with prodigious, unabated output. Although he joined the esteemed Valentine Gallery in 1935—the American representative of Matisse—and received stipends from various sources, Avery was never really a money-making artist, partly because of some predatory dealers. Roy Neuberger, for example, speculated at bargain basement prices on a cache of Avery's work from Valentine Dudensing in 1943, the year Avery left the gallery. Neuberger soon turned the work around to great profit and cut Avery out of the deal.

In 1926, the Averys moved into an artists' complex called Lincoln Arcade on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, on what is now part of Lincoln Center (as it happens, a block and fifty-odd years away from that coffee table). Their next-door neighbor was Stuart Davis. Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, and Jacques Villon were familiar visitors to the building. Here Avery primed his own canvases and learned to thin his pigments with turpentine. It was said he could make paint last longer than anyone. The Averys regularly welcomed other artists at their apartment, including Gottlieb and Rothko. Both eighteen years his junior, these artists—along with William Baziotes and Theodoros Stamos—directly drew on Avery's work for their own. With Rothko and Gottlieb talking through the night, Milton listened and sketched his guests. Sally cooked the hamburgers. Perhaps Milton was most talkative when he was reading aloud. This was his family's common and affordable form of entertainment; the reading list included Melville, Proust, Thoreau, Stevens, and Eliot—not too shabby. On Saturdays they all went to the galleries. In the summers it was off to Gloucester, Massachusetts, towns in Vermont, the Gaspé Peninsula, Quebec, or a road trip to Yellowstone and California. With their daughter, March, in tow, it could have been a scene out of Norman Rockwell.

Avery did not lead a storied public existence. This was not from lack of artistic passion, as some might claim, but from a completeness of vision matched with an intensity of discipline. He developed and matured as an artist, especially from 1940 on. Yet even as it appeared that his style—colorist, impressionist, always representational—was on the wane, as happened more than once, he did not stray from his general aesthetic direction. Hilton Kramer, who wrote the first monograph on Avery in 1962, remarked that it was "in Avery's aesthetic rather than in his biography that the key to his achievement will be found." Avery was so private that he falsified, successfully, the date of his own birth by eight years, relocating his birth year from 1885 to 1893 so as to court his younger wife. This detail was only uncovered in 1982 by Barbara Haskell. That white lie, she notes, was probably the only time this straightforward and one might even say modest painter exaggerated his lot in life.

If Milton Avery rarely discussed his work, the critics had no hesitations. His reputation was hashed out in the papers and the critical press with increasing frequency, especially from the late 1950s through his death in 1965 and after. For those seeking The Next Big Thing, Avery was chronically out of touch. He arrived in New York with what one might call a European style of modernism, not Cubism but more like Post-Impressionism mixed with the Hudson River School, just at a time when Stieglitz was closing up shop at his famous 291 Gallery. In the 1920s, Avery was a colorist when few wanted color; in the 1930s, he was a hazy impressionist when the world wanted hard detail; in the 1950s, he was a representationalist when all-over abstraction was the rage. Despite the bad timing, the critic for the old *New York Sun*, Henry McBride, was one of Avery's earliest

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champions, writing over twenty reviews between 1928 and 1951. McBride often urged collectors to purchase Avery's work and was influential in placing him at Valentine Gallery. He wrote of one show in 1936: "it is a fine and natural talent that he has, though not easily defined. He is a poet, a colorist and a decorator; so excellent in each of these diversions that he might exist on any one of them; yet I presume that being a poet will eventually be his strongest claim." Edward Alden Jewell, the critic for *The New York Times*, was not so generous. He wrote in 1932: "The fact that Milton Avery sticks, season after season, to his mysterious—or, as the case may be, his mildly exasperating—paint theories, makes one feel that he is perfectly sincere. These often grotesque and sometimes rather gruesome forms of his must mean something pretty definite to him."

Bad as this treatment was, the most lasting damage to Avery's reputation came from comparisons to Matisse. Many critics considered Avery derivative of Matisse. Avery was certainly aware of Matisse because of their connection to Valentine Gallery, and McBride was in fact the first to make the comparison in 1940. One critic called Avery "the Matisse of puritanism." Frank Getlein wrote in *The New Republic* in 1966: "The French Master wished to make an art as comfortable as a good armchair, and he succeeded. The American's art is more nearly described as a swim in the ocean off Maine." Sally Avery, in one interview, keyed in the differences: "Matisse was a hedonist and Milton was an ascetic. . . . That is the opposite of French sensibility. . . . Milton's nudes are the purest nudes you ever came across, where . . . Matisse's have an erotic quality."

Sally Avery was Milton's first critical champion and his best observer. She once remarked of her husband: "The subject of his drawing was not the object of his drawing. It could have been anything." In a seminal essay on Avery in *Arts Magazine* in 1957, Clement Greenberg agreed and acknowledged that he once underestimated the artist. Comparing Avery to Dove, Arnold Friedman, Marsden Hartley (whom Avery painted more than once), and John Marin, Greenberg wrote:

> Fifteen years ago, reviewing one of his shows at Paul Rosenberg's in *The Nation*, while I admired his landscapes, I gave most of my space to the derivativeness of the figure pieces, that made up the bulk of the show, and if I failed to discern how much there was in these that was not Matisse, it was not only because of my own imperceptiveness, but also because the artist himself had contrived not to call enough attention to it. . . . Avery's is the opposite of what is supposed to be a typical American attitude in that he approaches nature as a subject rather than as an object. One does not manipulate a subject, one *meets* it.

Ultimately, it was Milton Avery himself who let his interests be known. In 1931, he gave a rare interview to the *Hartford Courant* that, very early in his career, identified his position with pinpoint accuracy:

> the canvas must be completely organized through the perfect arrangement of form, line, color and space. Objects in the subject matter, therefore, cannot be painted representatively, but they must take their place in the whole design. . . . To those who do not see the aim of the artist, the effect seems to be a distortion . . . but to the painter it is simply the result of a planned organization of all the elements that enter into a painting in the space of the canvas. El Greco elongated his figures for the same reason.

There have been many artists as well as critics of modernism who have shared these painterly concerns. The achievement of Milton Avery can be found in the way he was able to articulate his faith in "the organization of all the elements" with an economy of means and, more significantly, with his color palette—different from both Bonnard and Matisse. He crafted *Red Rock Falls* through an ideal of interlocking shapes

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and colors that, I now realize, allows for a special form of dynamism. Even its checkered hatchmarks, as though sewn with a piece of thread, tie this work together.

The mid-size show at The Phillips Collection, "Discovering Milton Avery: Two Devoted Collectors, Louis Kaufman and Duncan Phillips," presents a wide range of Avery's oeuvre. Louis Kaufman, a violinist, played on the soundtracks of some of Hollywood's most famous films, including *Gone with the Wind* and *Casablanca*; he was also the first person to make a recording of Vivaldi's "Four Seasons." In 1928 he purchased the first work Avery ever sold, *Still Life with Bananas and a Bottle* (1928). He and his wife, Annette—who at ninety helped organize this show—developed a close friendship with the Averys that lasted forty years. During this time they received many paintings and sketches from Avery, and the two also sat for a number of portraits.

Paired to the Kaufman collection are the acquisitions of Duncan Phillips, who was Avery's first institutional buyer. In 1929 he acquired *Winter Riders* (1929) from a dealer for his new Washington gallery. This is more significant than it may appear. One of the great ironies of American collecting is that while Americans collected the French modernists ahead of the French, Americans often ignored the American school.

Rounding out the show is a handful of Avery's famous large colorist works of the late 1950s and early 1960s, on loan from the Milton Avery Trust. These canvases constitute a magnificent conclusion to the exhibition and shed additional light on the earlier work collected by Phillips and Kaufman.

What I noticed from this exhibition, some of it purchased for collection, other work received as gifts, is how haltingly and sometimes falteringly Avery's style developed: Compare the Matisse-like portrait of *Annette in a Green Dress* from 1933 with the distilled forms of *Annette Kaufman in a Black Dress*. Painted in 1944, *Black Dress* looks new even today while *Green Dress* appears fussy and, yes, derivative. There are also many drawings, sketches, and some exquisite drypoints here, crafted on discarded copper plates from *Progressive Grocer*, that reveal Avery's deft achievements in line, which often rival his skills as a colorist.

It is as a colorist, nevertheless, that Avery most influenced the artists and critics around him. Roger Fry, in *Transformations* (1926), rightly predicted the importance of color in the art to come: "as colour becomes incorporated into the integral plastic expression the principles which underlie its evocative power will claim a more conscious and deliberate investigation." Hans Hofmann maintained that "Avery was one of the first to understand color as a creative means. He was one of the first to relate colors in a plastic way." At Avery's memorial service in 1965, Mark Rothko famously remarked: "There have been several others in our generation who have celebrated the world around them, but none with that inevitability where the poetry penetrated every pore of the canvas to the very last touch of the brush. For Avery was a great poet-inventor who had invented sonorities never seen or heard before. From these we have learned much and will learn more for a long time to come." With quiet harmonies of color and line, Avery's lessons continue to instruct.

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New poems
by Eric Ormsby & William Logan

Traveler

An old horse in Appalachian rain
I stand at tether since the storm began,
remembering the first meadow where a man
taught me the bridle and the mouth-bit's pain.
Later he tutored me to thrill to the rein,
love quirt and spur, love even the span
of rib-pinching saddle-straps. And how we ran,
my hooves chipping flint-stars, all fiery my mane!

In rivulets of names rain monuments
the earth. My back has become a map:
Manassas, Chickamauga and Bull Run
blooded me, Appomatox cinched the strap.
Now Alexander, Caesar and Napoleon
reel on an old horse tethered to a fence.

—Eric Ormsby

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My grandfather's pocket watch

I

The filigreed watch case clicks open and inside
I find time's intimate machinery:
the interlocking wheels' circumference,
the pintoothed sprockets that still coincide,
even though the little self-important melody
that marked the subdivisions of the hour
is broken now, and mute.
Desolate of consequence,
the pocket watch's innards look like our
old diagrams of the Ptolemaic heavens
with epicyclical and sweet-greased spheres
—except that *Made in U.S.A.* appears
etched on a satiny spring,
and *George Evans*
& Son, New York, glints up from another.

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2

A second hand still whiskers the watch's face
and staggers when I shake it in my fist.

The dark dials mutter like two summer bees
imprisoned in petals, and I feel them beat

—the ratchet of a rope let down into a well,
breathless and staccato and discrete—

each instant demarcated by a little click
that falters and then halts until it's shook.

The watch is dove and pearl and velveteen
behind the dour digits of its face,

like hand-embroidered textiles or the stuffs
William Morris designed: vine-tangled arabesques

emblematic of luxuriance and rich
tissues drawn from some profounder life.

I twist the stem and listen for the tick
till a tiny, startled, hurrying succession

of twig-snapped seconds comes tiptapping out.
Each soft click is a comfort to my touch.

—*Eric Ormsby*

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The tide pool

The name of the town is lost.
A Kodak memory
restores the glacial scree
our bored Atlantic crossed

that burning July day.
The crowded tide drove in
like a release of sin
along the rocky bay,

leaving scattered tide pools
abandoned in its wake.
Beneath the glazed opaque
surface swam dark schools

that thrashed in private wars.
The pools were a modest hell—
a crab with a broken shell,
a starfish showing its scars.

Under the water-glass,
the fragile creatures wavered
as if a god had favored
their untidy, cramped crevasse,

though one by one
the infant pools dried.
The weaker creatures died
beneath the blinding sun.

I saw that life-giving wave
once more, beating the glacial rocks
below the broken docks,
when I stood at your grave.

—*William Logan*

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Letter from Madrid

Borrowed time in the *botellón*

by Michael Carlin

I don't remember having smelled so much hashish in the streets of Madrid on my last research trip here three years ago. This time it seems that there are few sixteen- to twenty-year-olds on the street who are not either rolling or smoking a joint. I happen to live in one of the better neighborhoods of central Madrid, less than a kilometer from Atocha Station, and about five minutes' leisurely walk from Lope de Vega's house, the Royal Academy of History, and the convent in which Cervantes is interred. And all of these sites are perfumed by the less than pious odor of the teens' oily Moroccan weed, usually in full view of the municipal police. That these stoned adolescents are in many ways the principal actors in the political life of today's Spain was one of the many truths that emerged in the days following the March 11 catastrophe that, as of this writing, has claimed 192 lives.[1]

Of course, not all of Spain's 1.1 children per fertile woman are smoking dope atop the rubble of the *siglo de oro*, but such behavior is an integral part of the social matrix within which the youth of Spain interpreted the mass murder of 3/11. The students absorbed the tragedy into the *botellón*: their Friday and Saturday evening routine of gathering in central Madrid's plazas to drink liters of cheap wine mixed with Coca Cola (*calimocho*). These groups of students can range in number from three to fifteen, and are made up exclusively of either university or high school students. Holding court in the plazas that function as the neighborhood hubs, the students enjoy a roving festival atmosphere that can run from as early as 8:30 pm until dawn. Raucous banter, collective song, and vandalism make up the usual evening's entertainment.

The Thursday terrorist attacks occurred only three days before the national elections on Sunday, time enough for the increasingly shrill emotive responses to congeal into a national mood, without the impediment of reasoned debate. José María Aznar's conservative government lost no time in scheduling the first of these popular responses for Friday afternoon. In Madrid alone, two million people turned out to demonstrate their desire for peace and their rejection of the Basque terrorist group ETA, which most people still believed had orchestrated the attacks. There was a consistency to the protest rhetoric of all assembled, which is summed up in the name of a Spanish organization of terror victims, *¡Basta ya!* ("Enough already!"). It was a rhetoric of weary disgust, whether with ETA, terrorism, or Aznar. However comprehensible from a psychological point of view, the upraised palms and other gestures of surrender employed at this gathering were a barren form of communication, for the mutual salving of wounds. The prospective rhetoric of vengeance and justice, each of which places further

1 The official tally, however, is 191 including a woman over seven months' pregnant with baby "Samuel."

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future demands upon the victim, was nowhere in evidence. I could only hope the angry young men would exhibit a clearer determination of what was to be done.

When this state-sponsored liturgy of free speech broke up, the post-university set left for dinner and their accustomed watering holes. The plazas of Madrid were, as always on Friday nights, left to the students. The occasion demanded a certain gravity instead of the usual anti-clerical and anti-capital battle cries. So they went about painting the same lapidary slogans they were chanting at the government sponsored rally—"ETA no! War no!" Among the groups of female revelers, black ribbons and peace signs were painted on freshly scrubbed cheeks, and, since it was a chill night, accessorized with Intifada scarves. This last item, made famous by the dashing élan with which it is worn by Yassir Arafat and the mystique it confers on his anonymous homicidal followers, is as much a part of the dress code for Spanish students as college sweatshirts and ball caps are for their American counterparts. Although the diamond pattern and fringed tassels impart a certain world-beat eclecticism to any ensemble, on that occasion, the piece seemed in bad taste, representing, as it does, a death cult psychosis whose primary m.o. is blowing up civilians on mass transit.

For most of Saturday, it seemed that the major parties and their candidates had indeed put away the *ad hominem* sniping typical of Spanish politics and were set to abide by the Electoral Commission's "day of reflection" that prohibited campaigning on Saturday, the day before the election. Pundits of the leftist press were not content to recite what everyone already knew: the Popular Party stood to benefit from an ETA attack and the Socialists from an attack by any Islamic terror organization. Given the almost universal public disapproval of the Aznar government's participation in the liberation of Iraq, it was once again the Popular Party's freedom from corruption that accounted for its lead going into the election, especially now that a Catalan official in the Socialists' coalition was recently revealed to have been holding secret negotiations with ETA. When ETA's political wing denied responsibility, press speculation began in earnest. It was suggested that the Interior Ministry was hiding evidence that might be detrimental to the government's poll numbers.

On Saturday night, the left's cynical prophecy appeared to be fulfilled. The Minister of the Interior announced that five suspects were in custody: three Moroccans and two Indians. It was not long before the young revelers put this final term into their syllogisms proving that the government had lied and withheld evidence. *Solidaridad activa*, the student intellectuals' euphemism for vandalism, had to be shown against this attempt at mass disenfranchisement. The spray paint was still wet on my parish church of San Sebastián, which had been burned by the students' grandfathers, when the call went out to assemble at the headquarters of the Popular Party.

In all, no fewer than nine thousand people showed up to chant "¡Aznar asesino!" on that election-eve day of reflection. Such an impressive spontaneous turnout was owed to the diffusion of the message by way of mobile telephones. Although campaigning was prohibited by the Election Commission, no opposition party officials were in attendance. It was a sight tailor-made for television news, complete with pre-edited sound-bites: nine thousand politically engaged citizens, most under thirty, confronting the conservative ruling elite ensconced in its lair. To the national press it seemed that finally, the legitimate voice of the people was heard, just in time for the late news and morning papers. Only on the day after the election was it discovered that most of the text messages came from an internet connection at an Extremaduran office of the Socialist Party.

After the stand at the party headquarters, students dispersed throughout Madrid in what now seems to me a hedge against media spin of the earlier publicity coup.

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Lest the message be confused by too much verbiage, the scores of students I witnessed running through central Madrid were all shouting but one word as they banged on pots: "Mentirosos" ("Liars"). With so many dead, the court of youth opinion could only convict a bystander of lying.

During the week after the election, a new symposium featuring the brightest lights of the Spanish academic left was announced. Its theme was to be the illegality of the war in Iraq and the "right of resistance" of Iraq's population. That the bombing of innocent Spanish civilians was claimed by its authors as part of this "resistance" to the "occupation" of Iraq has in no way slackened the suicidal rhetoric of post-colonial oppression. Such ideological connivance in their own destruction by Spain's intellectual and media elites has caused not even the slightest dyspepsia to any of the *Madrileños* with whom I regularly speak. Not only did they fail to reject Satan's pomp, they embraced him horns and all.

Now, such a moral failure should come as no surprise to anyone who has walked through the urine-soaked alleys around Plaza Mayor, with its graffiti providing an endless litany of the free peoples with the right to resist: Palestine, Iraq, and now presumably Moroccans living in Madrid. Nor should it surprise those who witnessed the spectacle of last year's Prince of Asturias Prize (Spain's highest award for achievement in the arts, sciences, and humanities) being posthumously awarded to Edward Said, spiritual father to countless victim fetishists. An overwhelmingly leftist press provides a popular outlet for this cant, and high school and university faculties guarantee future waves of indoctrinated youth. Much the same could be said for the intellectual landscape of the United States, however, in which at least one endowed academic chair has been named after Said.

Unlike the U.S., Spain failed to grasp the civilizational importance of its first national tragedy of the twenty-first century. Because of this failure, there will surely be more such tragedies visited upon Spain. At the moment when Spain most needed vigorous national discussion, her intellectual class failed her, and the students allowed themselves to be used as the proxies of demagogues. A frightened electorate had no power to resist the loudest solution on offer. All of this suggests that the terrorists did not err in selecting the weakest wildebeest of the herd. In decrying the attacks, not a few commentators have argued that the Spanish electorate allowed terrorists to become actors in Spain's political life. This is to miss the forest for the trees: the terrorists saw in Spanish society the volatility and fractiousness that is the precondition for terror's effectiveness, and they took advantage of it with the foreseeable political consequences.

The brittleness of Spanish political culture, such that it broke when put under the stress of terrorism, cannot be attributed to either terrorists or political opportunists. Such as these can only devour already moribund carrion. It must have been immediately apparent to the terrorists that Spain was living on borrowed time. With one of the lowest fertility rates in the known world, Spanish couples have created a hollow society united by the weakest of links. As Alasdair MacIntyre has so carefully argued, this substitution of sentiment for the more organic societal norms of faith and family straitens all forms of discourse, rendering impossible any substantive moral discussion within society as a whole. What blandishments can such a contraceptive society offer to the only children of Spain's eco-vanity to make them come in from the *botellón* and join in the search for a common good beyond the earnestly felt emotion of the moment? Little in the way of immediate gratification or collective high can be offered to compete with the fraternal thrill of calling a sitting Prime Minister a murderer to his face. The sad fact is that we cannot rely on Spain or the rest of Western Europe for anything but continued moral failure while its citizens are still too self-obsessed to replace their own populations.

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Theater

From "Embedded" to "in bed with"

by Mark Steyn

Six figures in masks enter the Office of Special Plans in Washington. They greet each other under portraits of Leo Strauss:

COVE: . . . *and this ignoramus writer says to me "The father of the neocons invented blue jeans?" I was embarrassed for him. "Leo," I said, "you pecker. Not Levi. Leo Strauss."*

DICK: *Gentlemen, gentlemen, settle down. I'd like to call this meeting of the Office of Special Plans to order. Rum Rum, how does it look?*

RUM RUM: *We are currently sufficiently deployed, locked and loaded, cocked and ready, champin' at the bit, poised for engagement, steady ready Freddy.*

DICK: *Excellent. How's the coalition building?*

RUM RUM: *Slow, but good news. Luxembourg is in. As to the rest of them—Germany, France, Russia—I say, fuck 'em.*

PEARLY WHITE: *Double fuck France.*

Well, I can't speak for everyone, but I had a grand old time at Tim Robbins's *Embedded*. By the midway point, I was laughing so much that my neighbors at the Public Theatre were beginning to stare. They were, by this stage, feeling not so much embedded as embalmed, in Mr. Robbins's burial of his own play. The audience's dissatisfaction arose from a simple confusion: they'd assumed Mr. Robbins's work was a satire on the way the Bushitler and his lying liars lyingly lied the country into a war with Iraq. In fact, it's a delightful satire on the left's inability to satirize.

Hitherto, I've been reluctant to subscribe to the theory that humor is inherently conservative. I confess there are even moments of Michael Moore's crockumentaries I've found myself laughing at. The film-maker has a comic's eye for the telling detail and, even if half the telling details are phony, he at least has an eye for the kind of telling detail to make up. But much of what else purports to be left-wing wit so confirms the stereotype of the plonkingly humorless bien pensant that it can only be the work of some savage right-wing satirist. Take Al Franken and Janeane Garofalo, the two stars of the new Air America "network." The network's inauguration received a ton of fawning publicity from "The Today Show" and the rest of the A-list plug circuit, even though it can't be heard in 99 percent of the country and in the remaining 1 percent of the fruited plain you can only pick it up on half-a-dozen shoestring stations where it's displaced various ethnic programming and thereby prompted huge complaints, by members of the Asian-American community, the Caribbean-American community and others, that they're being disenfranchised, their voices are being silenced, etc., in order to make way for rich white celebrities. If the Air America launch isn't the plot for some forthcoming side-splitting off-Broadway satire, it ought to be.

In the meantime, we have Tim Robbins, a Hollywood darling, brand-new Oscar-winner, and one of the most prominent vic-

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tims of the "crushing of dissent" in the Bush/Ashcroft era. As you may recall, Mr. Robbins was disinvited from a special fifteenth-anniversary screening of *Bull Durham* at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown because of his opposition to the war in Iraq. All over the world, in the gulags and prison camps and torture chambers, fellow political prisoners rose as one to express their solidarity with Mr. Robbins—or they would have done if, like him, they'd been allowed to go on all the TV talk shows to talk at length about being silenced. Still, this is how it starts. First they came for the celebrity guests at the Baseball Hall of Fame gala and I did nothing. Or rather they didn't come for him. They were supposed to send a limo to take him to the airport, but it never showed.

Anyway, those who've suspected Mr. Robbins was so self-parodic a celebrity firebrand that he must have been created in an animatronics laboratory by Karl Rove will have their thesis confirmed within the first twenty minutes of *Embedded*. We learn first of all that the whole baseball-dinner persecution thing still rankles, at least to judge from this solemn announcement at the beginning of *Embedded*: "This is the age where an institution's First Amendment rights supersede the individual's. If you don't like it, move to Iran. We're not fucking around. If you don't like it, get the fuck out and don't expect your money back."

The narrowly defined refund policy makes sound sense. What follows is a series of sketches about three groups involved in the invasion of an oil-rich Middle Eastern country called Gomorrah: the troops, the journalists "embedded" with them, and the sinister, masked sextet known as the "neocons." Lest you think these are just crude caricatures of Condi, Rummy, Rove, Wolfowitz, and Perle, the playwright has gone to great trouble to establish them as living, breathing characters in their own right by giving them funny names—"Gondola," "Rum Rum," "Cove," "Woof," and "Pearly White." Cheney doesn't need a funny name because his existing one—"Dick"—Mr. Robbins finds more than funny enough, as he attempts to demonstrate at length.

Though the dramatist has expended most of his creative energy on this group, the most revealing parts of the play are the broadly "naturalistic" sections devoted to America's men and women in uniform. These cardboard cut-outs are sentimentalized to a degree Hollywood propagandists of the Forties might have found excessive. We meet them as they're preparing to ship out: "Sarge" wants his wife to make sure she kisses the kids for him every night; "Monk" wants his gal to promise she won't sit under the apple tree with anyone else till he comes marching home; and the third is a young lady in maintenance, "Private Ryan," whose Appalachian simpleton of a dad tells her, "If I'd made any money, you wouldn't be going off to war."

They're all good-hearted, honest, simple folk—emphasis on the simple—writing simple letters back to their simple families in Simpletown, America. They're innocents too trusting to understand their manipulation by the neocon cabal. They swear less than Condi Rice. Once out in the desert, they're confused and homesick, wondering why it's not like they were brainwashed into believing it would be. Alas, Private Ryan gets captured by the Gomorrites and, even though the kindly enemy are treating her really well, the cynical neocons arrange for a fake dramatic rescue because it will look good on TV.

Mr. Robbins would appear to be covering himself with these scenes of tearful letters home from the boys and girls at the front. Having damned the Administration and the American media, his only heroes, between the play and the playbill, are *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, and the BBC (all British). So the soldier scenes seem to be there to (so to speak) pre-emptively neutralize accusations that he's anti-American. One grows used to the politically viable left insisting that, while they oppose the war, they, of course, support our troops.

But it's interesting to see what this means

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when they have to flesh it out: Mr. Robbins appears genuinely to believe that his bathetic wallows with Sarge and Monk are sympathetic, rather than grotesquely condescending. He respects the neocons enough to make them evil geniuses, but, as a general rule, everyone else in Tim Robbins's America is dumb as a brick. I had the opportunity to speak to many coalition soldiers in Iraq last spring, but, in even the briefest conversation, I found none as perfunctory and generic as Mr. Robbins's. Whatever the intention behind them, Sarge and Monk are so drained of life they confirm either the playwright's lack of interest in their world, or his total contempt for it (witting or unwitting). They also exemplify the evening's great weakness, the absence of transformative power, of a satiric imagination that can take the headlines and spin and armyspeak and enlarge them into a dramatic force.

Mr. Robbins has staged his own text, and Robbins the director is of a different order than Robbins the writer. The curious effect of this is that the professional polish of the production underlines the creaking amateurishness of the script. Richard Hoover's minimalist sets, Yasuko Takahara's note-perfect costumes and Erhard Stiefel's grotesque masks, the brisk pacing of a hit musical, and the pep of an ensemble cast kept busy with multiple roles, all seem to remind you that none of this effort is being expended on anything worth it.

There are the reassuring tics of serious theater—for example, those neocon masks, which is a somewhat overused legit shorthand for *commedia dell'arte* and other respectable precedents. The neocons themselves seem to be pale photocopies of the warhawks in *Dr. Strangelove* forty years ago. Colonel Hardchannel is the umpteenth variation of the buzzcut nut familiar from a hundred anti-war movies, and his opening appearance a retread of *Full Metal Jacket*. The 'tween-scene rock'n'roll—Bob Dylan's "Masters of War"—reminds you that none of these clichés have been rethought since the 1960s. Even Colonel Hardchannel's solitary trait—an obsession with showtunes—is reminiscent of an old "Monty Python" sketch about synchronized parade-ground camping. Although V. J. Foster's rendition of "I Whistle A Happy Tune" is amiably diverting, Hardchannel's Broadway baby act barely qualifies as a running joke. It's grafted on—it doesn't arise organically from the material.

But perhaps its worst failure is that it's a lot less funny than reality. Saddam Hussein, for example, wrote three romantic novels in the last three years of his toxic reign. One of them was turned into a musical, which, if only in Baghdad, outran *Cats*. His personal tastes remained frozen in 1958, at the moment the British-installed Royal Family was murdered and the Iraqi establishment lost reliable contact with western pop culture. So Saddam liked Capitol-era Sinatra LPs and remained wedded to British "Quality Street" chocolate and "HP Sauce" long after the British themselves had moved on to more exotic delicacies. The idea of the new Saladin sitting in his palace, writing his romantic novel while chewing toffees in the shape of obsolete British pennies and listening to "I've Got You Under My Skin" is more daffily comic than anything in Robbins's play. But then, in the Robbins scheme, Saddam barely figures.

It's one thing not to be as funny as a genocidal madman, quite another not to be as funny as Mark Shields of CNN. But take that joke about the "coalition of the willing": Rum-Rum tells Dick, "Luxembourg is in. As to the rest of them—Germany, France, Russia—I say, fuck 'em." Now the gag here is that only small irrelevant countries are in what John Kerry characterizes as this "fraudulent coalition." This isn't, technically, true. A majority of G7 nations, NATO members, and EU countries currently have troops in Iraq. But let that pass. The point is for the purposes of a cheap laugh the "fraudulent coalition" is received wisdom among the like-minded at the Public Theatre. If you can't get a laugh out of people who agree with everything

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you're saying, there's something wrong. But the Luxembourg line got a small titter—the reaction of an audience expecting something to be funny and then discovering just as the laugh is rising in their gorge that there's no joke there.

What went wrong? Well, for one thing, Luxembourg wasn't on our side. It was with the other guys, playing Mini-Me to Jacques Chirac's Dr. Evil. Mr. Robbins carelessly picked it because it is famously small. Here's what Mark Shields, long-time TV Democrat, sneered a few weeks before the war on CNN's "Capitol Gang": "Everyone's feeling better. Albania signed on." Mr. Shields has no great reputation for wit, but, as cheap cracks go, that's really much more effective than Mr. Robbins's. And, unlike the conscription of Luxembourg, it has the merit of being accurate.

The best jokes in the show happen to be true—like the Pentagon's "Office of Special Plans," which nomenclature seems expressly designed to get the likes of Mr. Robbins overheating. But, if the gags are flat, the play's "ideas" are even more so. *Embedded*'s obsession with Leo Strauss as the father of the neocons is almost touching in its misguided literalness. "Neocon" is a word that, since 9/11, has ceased to have any meaning other than a very broad shorthand for pro-Bush Jew (as David Brooks put it, "-con" is short for conservative and "neo-" is short for Jewish) or, indeed, pro-Bush period. The notion that Strauss is the philosophical father of the Iraqi occupation would come as news to "Dick," "Gondola," and "Rum Rum." Nonetheless, Mr. Robbins insists on making his plotters sing paeans to their old mentor. As Rum Rum puts it: "Leo Leo/ Leo Strauss/ You're the man./ Your mind is a wonder./ You leave us in awe./ Rah rah rah./ (I can't rhyme good.)" Even a fiercely partisan audience couldn't muster much enthusiasm. Indeed, they seemed resentful at having stumbled on a piece of smug anti-Bush agitprop too torpid even for them. To be effective, satire has to exaggerate a recognizable reality. Robbins is mainly satirizing his own conspirazoid preoccupations.

If *Embedded* is endearingly incompetent, something much slyer is going on at A. R. Gurney's new play *Mrs. Farnsworth*, at the Flea Theatre. It has nothing much in common with Tim Robbins's entertainment, except that it also has an anti-Bush animus and it's also one act and ninety minutes—the inability of anti-Bush dramatists to go the distance may be a telling sign of the genre's deficiency. If Robbins is preaching listlessly to the choir, Gurney is maliciously gossiping to it in the vestry. As noted previously, Mr. Gurney seems to have come unmoored from his natural habitat—the WASP dining room—ever since he introduced that singing dog in *Sylvia*. A year ago, in *O Jerusalem!*, he managed to write a play arguing for the end of the Jewish state in the Middle East, but he did it so understatedly nobody noticed. The preoccupations of *Mrs. Farnsworth* are more suited to the Gurney style.

We meet the eponymous heroine when she interrupts a creative writing class in New York given by Gordon (Danny Burstein). Played by Sigourney Weaver, Marjorie Farnsworth is a Connecticut grande dame of effortless hauteur, pink cashmere and pearls. Her husband describes her as a "lovely rainbow trout. In order to keep her in play, I like to maintain a taut line." She's certainly a fish out of water among Gordon's students.

"I'm a rich Democrat," she explains. But Mrs. F needs to learn how to write because she has a story she simply must tell. It's about a nice coed from Vassar who meets a callow party boy from Yale and they hit it off. They hit it off so well that pretty soon she's telling him she's pregnant and he (via the family lawyer) is paying her off to get an abortion. Gordon, who evidently puts so much creativity into his creative writing that there's nothing left for his own personality but a compendium of leftie clichés, is practically salivating. Mrs. Farnsworth was at Vassar in the late Sixties, which happens to be when a certain well-known party boy was at Yale. The suitor with the fateful seed has "a slight alcohol problem." Ah-ha! He is "the

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scion of a distinguished Republican family." Yes! Grandfather was a Senator. Yes! The dad has Presidential ambitions. Yes, yes, yes!!!

Mrs. F (she resists the deplorable classroom practice of using first names) has only the first paragraph of her putative novel. Her husband has destroyed the rest, reluctant to see her become "some Connecticut Paula Jones." But she is set on her course. "I'm angry about what's going on in our country," she says. "It's time to speak out."

As played by the redoubtable Miss Weaver, Mrs. Farnsworth has the faintly desperate air of a respectable lady who's got a yen for a Jane Fonda phase thirty years too late but can't quite bring herself to take the leap. Mr. Farnsworth is played by John Lithgow as the usual A. R. Gurney repressed WASP but, this being a political play and Mr. F being a Republican, he's kitted out with William F. Buckley mannerisms. The man who isn't there is, naturally, George W. Bush, but, by the time Gurney's through with him, he's made it plain he feels there's no there there. That's also the reason Tim Robbins doesn't bother having him on stage in *Embedded*, but it's fair to say Gurney is far more forensic in his contempt.

The play alternates between a portrait of a complicated marriage and wildly half-formed op-ed assertions. By the end, Mrs. Farnsworth has learned from her fellow creative-writing types to celebrate diversity, which she hadn't been doing a lot of back in New Canaan. "I don't want to be exclusionary anymore," she says, rather touchingly for a character created by one of our most exclusive dramatists. "Maybe if we all could learn to look at people not as good and evil, or Republicans or terrorists, but simply as fellow human beings with different first names, things might improve in this country." Well, it's a bit long for a bumper sticker, but its heart is in the right place, with its generous outreach not just to terrorists but to Republicans, too.

Staged by Miss Weaver's husband, Jim Simpson, with some inventive touches—enquiring students placed among the audience, for examples—the play's brittle elegance glosses over its squalid premise: How would Mr. Gurney react if someone were to concoct, on no evidence whatsoever, a youthful abortion scandal about him? Presumably sensitive to this line of attack, the playwright plants the suggestion that Mrs. Farnsworth may have a college story to tell about John Kerry, too. Really? How about Ralph Nader and Lyndon LaRouche? The hemming and hawing eventually threaten to consume the play. The closest Gurney comes to passion is when Forrest Farnsworth chalks up on the blackboard for the benefit of Gordon's rougher hewn students the neglected virtues of his class (social, not creative writing), preeminent of which is "civility."

Now we're getting to it. What poor confused Mrs. Farnsworth is most affronted by, it seems, is that George W. Bush betrayed his own. "You're angry with him because he's doing everything you can't bring yourself to do," says her husband. "He's pretending he wasn't one of us in the first place."

"That's one thing I give him credit for," says a fellow student. "He knew the Titanic was sinking, and jumped to the Southwest."

Mrs. Farnsworth snorts, "Yes, but he didn't even land on a horse. The man can't ride, not even with a western saddle. All he does is wander around that so-called ranch, taking swipes at scrub oaks with a chain saw.

Poor Tim Robbins, immersing himself in the works of Leo Strauss, is such a piker. At *Mrs. Farnsworth*, you're surprised only that it's taken so long for this play to be written: the revulsion felt for Mr. Bush by so many people around the world—from Greenwich, Conn. to Paris, France—is primarily aesthetic. Gurney is the perfect dramatist to articulate this great whine of disdain. If Robbins could only come clean about his snobbery, he might have a hit.

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Art

The ancient Greeks: Were they like us at all?

by Victor Davis Hanson

The classical Greeks were really nothing like us—at least that now seems the prevailing dogma of classical scholars of the last half-century. Perhaps due to the rise of cultural anthropology or, more recently, to a variety of postmodern schools of social construction, it is now often accepted that the lives of Socrates, Euripides, and Pericles were not similar to our own, but so far different as to be almost unfathomable. Shelley's truism that "We are all Greeks" has now become, as we say, "inoperative."

M. I. Finley, the great historian of the ancient economy, spent a lifetime to prove his questionable thesis that the Greeks—who imported grain from southern Russia, calibrated the cost of the Parthenon to the drachma, and left us a plethora of mortgage stones, financial inventories, and complicated estate exchanges—were to be understood as economically unsophisticated and irrational, more as tribal barterers than calculating capitalists without much abstract appreciation of interest, supply, demand, or any of the other practices associated with the complex market. Historians of gender more recently have sought to show that the Greeks were without real sexual identity, their sexual mores not understandable through innate natural proclivities, much less fathomable by analogy to common social customs across time and space. With whom and how one had sex was instead "constructed" and thus explicable only through understanding of Foucauldian power relationships of submission and dominance.

By the same manner, ancient Hellenic childhood is supposedly equally enigmatic to us. Art historians have pointed out that Greek kids were not customarily sculpted and painted as real children, but most often portrayed through convention (or is it due to artistic incapacity?) as veritable shrunken adults—mature frowns and puzzled expressions slapped on tiny faces. The proverbially rich Greek language, we are often reminded further, lacks the variety of English's clearly defined and evolving hierarchy of childhood nomenclature: "baby," "toddler," "kid," "teenager," "adolescent," "young adult." The chronological inexactness of Greek's numerous generic terms for youth—*pais*, *kouros*, *neanias*—is offered as further proof of the great divide that separates attitudes toward coming of age in both ancient Greece and modern America.

And yet the sophisticated maritime loans in the Attic orators, or the scurrilous attacks on promiscuity, sodomy, and effeminate men in Aristophanes' comedies, or the prevalence of love among married couples in ancient Athens makes us wonder whether the Greeks really were all that different from us in their likes, dislikes, prejudices, and habits. Purportedly locked away in their northern European Victorian studies so far from the dust and stones of Greece, so ignorant of the new Cambridge anthropol-

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ogy, were our nineteenth-century classicists all that far off in thinking that the founders of Western civilization were familiar and approachable to us precisely because we as Westerners were their spiritual and intellectual successors? This feeling of a shared and common human experience is exactly what we receive from a wonderful new exhibition of classical Greek art depicting children and adolescents through gravestones, red- and black-figure vases, and terracotta miniature sculptures.

Ponder the title of this fascinating exhibition currently at the Cincinnati Art Museum, organized by Jenifer Neils of Case Western Reserve University and John Oakley of the College of William and Mary under the auspices of the Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation, the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College, and the National Endowment for the Humanities: "Coming of Age in Ancient Greece: Images of Childhood from the Classical Past."[1] The phraseology is derived from Margaret Mead's own famous (and flawed) anthropological study of adolescent sexuality among Samoan teenagers that sought to introduce Westerners to an unfathomable alternate universe of young female ritual among third-world peoples, who were purportedly much more relaxed about their sexual needs and desires. Thucydides may have reminded us that human nature is unchanging across time and space, but contemporary classical scholars have countered that ancient Athens would seem a very bizarre place to us today—witness the current popularity by classical scholars of quoting the poet Louis MacNeice's famous lines, "And how one can imagine oneself among them/ I do not know;/ It was all so unimaginably different/ And all so long ago."

The effect of viewing some 126 displays from American, Canadian, and European museums is an almost eerier resonance between past and present not discernible even through close reading of Greek literature. Greek children in a variety of contexts in the current exhibition are shown playing with familiar household pets like cats, small birds, and geese. Their toys seem to have come right out of small-town America of the 1940s—spinning-tops, hoops and sticks, jointed dolls, even seesaws. Greek moms, we learn, had their potties and training chairs—and rooms full of assorted cluttered junk such as mechanical toy rollers, pig-rattles, and wheeled horses. If we think clay for plastic, the experience is not much different from strolling through the aisles of Toys-R-Us. One terracotta spherical ink-well is identical to a Voit soccer-ball—even down to the familiar pattern of stitched ridges.

We are told that Greece was a male-dominated society where women were often segregated and relegated to the kitchen and care of the children, while men fought, conducted business, or ran the government. Perhaps—as, for example, a group of terracotta sculptures from central Greece shows a young girl learning to cook from an older woman. But from this exhibition there also emerges a sense of female confidence and a familiarity between the sexes unknown even today in much of the world. Carefree young girls play knucklebones. They carry one another piggyback as punishment for not hitting a target with stones or balls in the popular game of *ephedrismos*, and bare-armed, bare-faced, and bare-ankled they are taught to dance.

On an Attic red-figure cylix or stemmed drinking-cup there is a surprising scene of two young women who appear to be headed for school. One nonchalantly carries her writing stylus. Does the vase suggest that females were more commonly educated than we think, or are the two meant to be a

1 "Coming of Age in Ancient Greece: Images of Childhood from the Classical Past" opened at the Cincinnati Art Museum on May 1 and remains on view through August 1. The exhibition was previously on view at the Onassis Cultural Center, New York, from January 22 to April 15. It will next be seen at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, from September 14 to December 5, 2004.

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weird parody by the painter of an everyday male ritual—or again are they young courtesans who embrace book-learning because it is indispensable to the seductive arts plied in the male-dominated symposia? In any case, learning seems ubiquitous from these scenes of everyday life, as both boys and girls are seen with writing materials. In addition, there are fascinating examples of papyrus paper and wood tablets from Egypt on which school children have left to us unfinished and error-plagued rote assignments—including a particularly poignant example where the young student confused his alphabet, transposing *phi* and *chi*.

There is subtlety in much of Greek ceramic art that strikes an immediate chord with modern viewers. On a mid-sixth-century Attic black-figure amphora, for example, four men seem to be watching a young girl on a swing. But on closer examination something a bit strange seems to be going on. Most likely we are witnessing the ritual of the *Aiora* ("swinging"), in which youth reenacted the myth of Erione, the young teen who committed suicide by hanging herself in sorrow over the murder of her father Ikarios. Was this just an annual rite, or sometimes an impromptu expiation conducted to stop teen-age suicides—a tragedy that may well have transpired in waves of despair as we sometimes see today among high-school cliques? In any case, swinging amid friends and mentors in the ancient Greek world seems as wise a prophylactic to depression and angst as do Prozac and visits to the local shrink in ours.

In the past two decades—given the understandable hysteria over sexual predation by clergy and Michael Jackson and his coterie of pre-teen sleep-overs—American society has turned its attention to a purported epidemic of sexual molestation. Like Claude Rains in *Casablanca* we are shocked to see improper behavior in an age of easily accessible pornography, a crass popular culture of simulated sex and breast-grabbing on Super Bowl Sunday, and pre-teen beauty pageants. We are even troubled over the proper nomenclature of this apparent outbreak of physical relationships between adults and those under eighteen—sometimes looking to ancient Greece to learn whether our wayward mentors are pedophiles ("sexually interested in all children") or pederasts ("dominant pursuers of passive male teens").

It is not that Greeks were prudes. Indeed, as we see from a number of a variety of red-figure vases, the casualness of male nudity on the racecourse and in the wrestling ring gives off a definite sexual air. But we also see young boys with older tutors in both work and play—Hermes with the infant Arkas, or a near naked youth sitting at the feet of an aged beer-bellied tutor or *paidagogos*. The proximity of older relatives with young boys and girls conveys a naturalness and non-sexual familiarity belied by the lurid stories of Greek love. Why so? Perhaps it is the active participation of vigilant parents—ubiquitous in the exhibition—who escorted their children to school, who were physically proximate to their kids for most of the day, and who felt that everything from cooking to playing were skills acquired only through parental instruction in a society where latch-key kids and day-care centers were unknown.

If we can learn anything from these examples of the grind of everyday life as portrayed on vases and in stone, the danger of abuse lies not from the close interaction per se of child and adult, but rather from the absence of parental involvement, coupled with the abrogation of family responsibility in favor of the school, church, or baby-sitter. Thus additional Boeotian terracotta figurines capture a balding old man offering grapes to a young solitary girl, in a touching scene that suggests love for a grandchild—similar to a picture from a black-figure Attic vase that portrays a young boy learning the craft of shoemaking surrounded by the company of older adults.

Of course, we must avoid stereotypes. Not all parents and children are either happy—or even alive. The exhibition presents grim examples of marble grave steles

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where parents grieve over lost infants—a common occurrence in a premodern society where perhaps half of all pregnancies were not successful, and of those that were, one in three infants did not survive childhood. There is also evidence that the Greeks had no illusions that they all were always either good spouses or parents. In a particularly chilling red-figure calyx-krater from Italy, Jason vents his fury at Medea, even as their two murdered sons (her revenge for his infidelity) lie nearly neglected on a nearby altar. The parents bicker, while only their nurse and male tutor seem to mourn the two young bodies nearby.

There is a rich diversity in the show—and Professors Oakley and Neils are to be congratulated for the selection of vases, metal jewelry, stone and terracotta sculpture, and wood and paper artifacts that leave us with an appreciation that Hellenic excellence in art spanned four or five centuries and was found throughout the Greek-speaking Mediterranean.

A final surprise of the exhibition is that the most moving everyday scenes and toys seem to be from Boeotia—the ancient equivalent of our own rural heartland. If we naturally associate sophisticated Greek art only with Athens and to a lesser extent with Corinth and Italy, we forget that thousands of other Greeks in the shadows in places like the perennially maligned Boeotia were just as artistically adept, and perhaps possessed an eye for the everyday things that matter but are forgotten by their more heralded urban counterparts. And that seems yet another lesson for us as well—that there is plenty of art and culture beyond our own triangle of New York, Washington, and Los Angeles that sees what is important in life in pretty much the same way as did these rural Greeks.

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Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

Chief of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra since 1997, Mariss Jansons is moving on to the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam. The Dutch are in for a treat. Jansons is a first-class conductor, in an age that boasts few. Pittsburgh management is taking its time about appointing a successor, which is smart: Jansons is a hard man to replace; names don't exactly leap to mind. (But I might note that *someone* should grab Antonio Pappano, now resident at Covent Garden.)

The PSO took something of a victory lap—or valedictory lap—with Jansons in the form of two concerts at Carnegie Hall. The first offered Beethoven, Prokofiev, and Stravinsky; the second offered a sole work—Mahler's Symphony No. 7.

The Beethoven on the first night was the Eighth Symphony, that fantastically ebullient thing sandwiched between the elegant Seventh and the shocking, immortal Ninth. Rarely will you find Beethoven more high-spirited or unbuttoned, than in the Eighth. And Jansons and the Pittsburghers played the hell out of it.

Oh, sure, there were some blips—technical blips—here and there. But this was a phenomenally energetic performance, from beginning to end. They played as though grateful to have the opportunity, as though they'd never get a chance to play the Eighth again. Orchestras are supposed to be tired of playing Beethoven symphonies. (These days, they ought to be tired of playing Mahler symphonies, but that's another story.) However, we should say of Beethoven fatigue what Dr. Johnson said of London fatigue.

The Prokofiev was a concerto, the Piano Concerto No. 2, with Yefim Bronfman as soloist. Bronfman is one of the most satisfying pianists in the world, and he proved himself so again here. The Prokofiev Second is not as well known as the two concertos it rests between: The First is prized for its youthful rambunctiousness; the Third is outright canonical. But Bronfman, Jansons, and the PSO made an excellent case for the Second. It is not immortal Prokofiev, but it is by no means embarrassing.

And, quite interestingly, Bronfman played, as an encore—after this bells-and-whistles Soviet piano concerto—a little Scarlatti *esercizio*. Brilliant.

This first concert closed with the *Firebird* Suite, traversed with due panache. The Pittsburghers weren't tired of this one either. And they did us the favor of reminding us why we loved this music in the first place.

It's not every night that you hear the Mahler Seventh, despite the ubiquity of Mahler. In fact, the Seventh is probably the least played of the nine symphonies, along with the Eighth. (The Eighth is that called "The Symphony of a Thousand," because of the Cecil B. DeMille-like forces required for it.) A critic friend of mine, Fred Kirshnit, offered a theory about why the Seventh is relatively seldom played: It's a happy sym-

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phony. Very happy. Conductors, when they show themselves in Mahler, like to suffer. They may think there's something illegitimate, or at least suspect, about Mahler's happiness, in the Seventh (and about Beethoven's, in the Eighth!).

I think this may be true. But I also think that the Seventh is somewhat hard to understand, and hard to love at first. I believe you have to grow into it, and that it has to grow on you. (The exception: the shouting, joyous, celebratory last movement, which enters your heart immediately, and doesn't leave.)

The Seventh, under Mariss Jansons, started with fantastic intensity—the intensity familiar from the Beethoven Eighth. It also brought some remarkably distinguished French-horn playing. One does not expect to hear such playing outside the Vienna or Berlin Philharmonic.

In this first movement, Jansons gave us panoramic Mahler, Mahler in technicolor. And the orchestra was crackling, with everything in place. Of course, Jansons rehearses nearly everything to the nth degree. He is famous, or notorious, for it. In fact, this penchant for thorough rehearsing was one of the things that nixed him for director of the New York Philharmonic. Jansons was in the running, but when he came to guest-conduct, he rehearsed them like the devil. The players took offense. Lorin Maazel came to guest-conduct, too. He canceled a rehearsal, telling them they didn't need it. They said, "We want Lorin!" (and Lorin got the job). Or so the story goes.

In the Mahler first movement, Jansons was a tight manager of affairs, but he didn't strangle. Every page felt right. And the intensity was so great, I wondered whether the orchestra could keep it up. But, truth is, this white-knuckle intensity isn't needed again until the fifth and final movement.

The second movement—Nachtmusik: Allegro moderato—was indeed night-like, spooky. It was also insinuating, on little cat feet. This is a hard movement to get right, even as this entire symphony is a difficult one to conduct. (Perhaps that's another reason it is so often left alone.) But Jansons had his forces playing easily together. They responded keenly to one another, as much like chamber musicians as like orchestral ones.

The third movement—a scherzo—has a tricky beginning, neatly handled by Jansons, with tight, clean beats. Under this baton, the music was unflagging, and not at all episodic (which it can be). The next movement—Nachtmusik: Andante amoroso—registered simplicity. Simplicity above all. It wasn't precious, it wasn't overladen. Mahler, that genius, could be a very simple guy—and good conductors know it.

In the Finale, the intensity came back, with a vengeance. And with that intensity was extreme gaiety, festiveness. I think of a wedding when I hear this music; maybe I think of Mendelssohn's march, another piece in C major. In certain spots, Jansons very definitely brought out the character of a marching band (yes, a marching band. How Mahler loved them! See, or hear, his Symphony No. 3). This is a difficult movement to play—in a difficult symphony to play—but Jansons let none of that show. The music poured out of him, and out of his orchestra, and when the Seventh ended, triumphantly, the Carnegie Hall audience was on its feet.

I must report feeling oddly sad: I simply knew that I would never hear the Seventh Symphony of Mahler played so well again. Hope I'm wrong. I doubt it.

Michael Tilson Thomas has been chief of the San Francisco Symphony since 1995, and he is not likely to go anywhere anytime soon. By all accounts, they love him in the Bay Area. And surely a good portion of this affection is justified. Tilson Thomas is a capable conductor—sometimes a superb one—even if he can also be an immensly annoying one.

He and his orchestra had two nights in Carnegie Hall, too. The first started with a new transcription of Debussy's *En blanc et noir*, a piece for two pianos. You didn't think *En blanc et noir* needed an orchestral transcription? Well, the San Francisco Sym-

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phony apparently did, because it commissioned one, from Robin Holloway, a composer and scholar. It is a successful one, too. In fact, it sounds like something Debussy might have done, if he had wanted—and you can hardly do better than that.

This concert continued with another SFS commission, *My Father Knew Charles Ives*, by John Adams. No, Adams's father didn't know Charles Ives, but Adams feels a kinship with that earlier American composer, and this three-sectioned work is meant to recall Ives's *Three Places in New England*. It is a worthy effort, describing the composer's own past, and paying tribute—in a way—to America itself.

The program ended with *Sheherazade*, and it was . . . how delicately do you want this put? It was far and away the worst—the dullest, the most offensive—account of Rimsky-Korsakov's hit I have ever heard or will ever hear. It was painfully slow. Stupefyingly slow. And did I say it was dull? I quipped after that it was as though Sheherazade had elected to save herself by putting the Sultan to sleep, rather than fascinating him with Arabian tales for all those nights.

But the San Franciscans' performance served one function: It meant that Valery Gergiev's account with the Kirov Orchestra, on Opening Night, wasn't the worst performance of *Sheherazade* in Carnegie's 2003–04 season.

The SFS's second concert began with a violin concerto, the strange and wondrous one by Berg, played by Gil Shaham. This violinist has many virtues, and most of them were on display here. He began in an almost experimental way, as if to say, "What is this strange concerto?" His tone was a mixture of the raw and the sweet. That was appropriate. His playing was clean-lined yet Romantic—that was appropriate too. All technical matters were in the bag; one could just relax, and concentrate on interpretation. The second (and final) movement was a combination of severity and lyricism—again, appropriate. Shaham left an overall impression of intelligence, musicality, and technical wherewithal. Some objected, after the concert, that Shaham hadn't been "passionate" enough, or "involved" enough—that he had been too restrained. My own view is that this concerto has enough "action" in it without much self-assertion on the part of the soloist. Shaham's lack of excess was noble, and a little surprising, to me, much as I like this violinist.

The big orchestral work on this program was Mahler's Symphony No. 5. Now, Michael Tilson Thomas is known as a Mahlerian, and not without reason: I have heard him give at least two good Mahler performances, including an excellent one of the Sixth Symphony (sometime in the mid-90s). His recordings of Mahler have won widespread acclaim.

But some of us have discerned a sad degeneration in Tilson Thomas: His Mahler interpretations have gotten slow and mannered—have become overinterpretations. So it was in this Fifth. At times he seemed to be trying to out-Lenny his mentor (Bernstein). Tempos were too slow—although not *Sheherazade*-slow—and ponderous. There was nothing in outright bad taste, mind you; one was simply all too aware of the conductor, and his conscious shaping of the music, and the personal stamp he was placing upon it. I, for one, appreciate that Tilson Thomas has thought about this symphony, and that he loves it (which is obvious). But as soon as they tell a conductor, "You're a Mahler genius!" look out: He's liable to believe it and go off the rails.

I will retail one of my favorite musical anecdotes, which I prize for its wisdom: Before rehearsing a Beethoven concerto, the late pianist Malcolm Frager turned to an orchestra and said, "As I am not a Beethoven specialist, shall we take the proper tempos?"

The Adagietto in the Mahler Fifth is one of the most beautiful things in all of music. But it must not be too slow. It must breathe, must move, to have its effect. It is not a dirge. (And even a dirge must move.) Tilson Thomas brought the music to a standstill, which is just ruinous. The marking might as well have been Lento (Lenny-

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to?), not Adagietto. And the *etto*, frankly, should make the music slightly faster than plain *Adagio*.

The final movement began with a very, very, very unfortunate French-horn entrance. Put it this way: If your worst enemy were principal French horn of an orchestra, you would not wish on him an entrance like this one. But the man (or woman—I didn't see) recovered nicely, the mark of a champ. Tilson Thomas himself did better in this movement than in previous ones, letting the music speak for itself more, giving to Mahler some of his excitement and energy (Mahler's own excitement and energy, I mean). Of course, a movement like this, inviting less "interpretation," is harder to wreck. You simply let it run. Tilson Thomas at least did that.

Leave the orchestral for a violin recital, that presented by Maxim Vengerov, with Fazil Say at the piano. Vengerov is the Russian virtuoso who is one of the most gifted and thrilling musicians in the world; Say is a Turkish pianist whose discography includes an album of Gershwin. We live in a global village, musically and otherwise.

Much as Vengerov may be known for showing off, he gave a rather "serious" recital, composed of Bach, Brahms, and Beethoven (in that order). I am reminded of a funny line from Artur Schnabel: "My programs are boring both before and after intermission."

Vengerov is never boring, needless to say (neither was Schnabel). He played Bach's Sonata No. 1 in B minor fairly freely, but not incorrectly or offensively. His lines were long and soulful, but legitimately Baroque. He reminded me of Ida Haendel, a violinist of a previous generation who refused to straitjacket her early music. Fazil Say was similar to Vengerov in the Bach, although he should have been a touch more assertive. No matter what you do, you will not outshine or upstage Vengerov—have no fear.

Following the Bach was a Brahms sonata, that in A major, Op. 100. This is one of the most amiable works in Brahms, which makes it very amiable indeed. Vengerov played with authority and heart, as usual. He infused the first movement with nostalgia. His last note—the last note of this movement—was bracingly aristocratic. I mention this particular because Vengerov does nothing perfunctorily or carelessly. There is not a banal or wasted gesture in his playing.

As for the pianist, he was much too retiring, too hesitant, too tentative—one wanted to goose him a little.

In the second movement, Vengerov was a bit of a gypsy, although he retained that nobility. And the third movement—with the unusual marking of Allegro grazioso (quasi andante)—is one of the noblest things in Brahms, speaking of nobility. It also finds the composer in one of his sweet, tranquil, nothing-will-agitate-me moods. Vengerov captured all this splendidly, showing his musical affinity (his affinity for anything musical). Fazil Say remained a bit bland.

The second half of the program began with a Brahms work almost never played: the Scherzo in C minor for Violin and Piano. Here, Vengerov was both vigorous and playful; his pianist, happily, was the same way.

And then the printed program concluded with Beethoven's "Kreutzer" Sonata, one of the most important works in the violin-and-piano literature (although a pianist might object that we should say the piano-and-violin literature, as Beethoven clearly indicated his home instrument first on the title page). In the opening movement, Vengerov wasn't at his sharpest, technically, and neither was Say. One wanted more articulation and definition from both of them. But the second movement—Andante con variazione—was nicely shaped, each variation given its character. It was a pleasure to hear Vengerov's creativity blend with Beethoven's. The violinist did not detract from the master; he enhanced him.

The Finale (Presto) was sheer enjoyment, with no one enjoying the experience more than Vengerov. This is typically the case with him.

The first encore was a Brahms Hungarian

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Dance, in G minor, and it was ultra-stylish. You have heard this piece a million times, but not quite like this: Vengerov played it as though improvising it on the spot. He was hammy, no question, but extremely musically so. Brahms would have applauded.

And then Vengerov told the story of *Ferdinand the Bull*. Excuse me? Yes, in an endearing Russian accent, he related this story beloved by children around the world. He would play intermittently, too, as this is a composition by Alan Ridout, a Briton (who died in 1996). A little narration, a little playing—that is the piece. The entire performance was enormously charming, but it was not just charming: Vengerov showed off a fearsome, diabolical technique.

He did not leave the audience with that, however, closing the evening with Massenet's "Méditation," which from this bow was equal parts purity and feeling.

The most talked-about portrayal of the Metropolitan Opera season has been the Salome of Karita Mattila. *Salome*, as you know, is the mad sprint of an opera by Richard Strauss—a close cousin of his *Elektra*. Mattila, as you also know, is the Finnish soprano, a conqueror of important operatic roles and a recitalist of electricity and taste. Frankly, it will be hard for anyone who saw Mattila as Salome to see anybody else in that role. She was the complete package: vocal, musical, dramatic, psychological. You might find someone to sing the role as well; you might find someone to act it as well. But you would be hard pressed to find someone to deliver the total goods, à la Karita.

In the new production by Jürgen Flimm, Mattila was onstage the entire time—right from the beginning. You couldn't take your eyes off her. She was a crazed brat, capable of seducing anyone. There was no end to her wiles. And she was almost frighteningly involved in her role. The dance? Choreographed by Doug Varone, it was ferocious: some (mock) bullfighting, some (mock) fornication, a little lapdancing and pole-swinging, from the strip club—everything. It all ended in nudity ("full frontal," as we say). The house was thick with opera glasses. In fact, sellers of such glasses must have done a brisk business.

The Mattila voice is an interesting one. It can be pillowy, indistinct; and then it can take on focus and precision. One moment it is diffuse; the next, it cuts. I have never been able to explain it. On the night I heard her, the diction was a little mushy, and the voice was a little overextended. But why not push it to the limit? This is *Salome*, after all, no time to be shy. One can husband later.

Mattila sang the Final Scene—the Mad Liebestod, I like to call it—brilliantly. This was an actual conversation with that severed head (albeit a one-way conversation). She kissed that head, finally, for what seemed like a full three minutes, then fell back exhausted. I think the entire audience, after this opera—this mad sprint—fell back exhausted, too.

The tenor Matthew Polenzani was Narraboth, and he was gorgeous-voiced, as usual. Albert Dohmen was Jochanaan, and he was rich and arresting. He lent a touch of holiness to this role (as one should). The Herod of Siegfried Jerusalem was properly rough and befuddled, and the Herodias of Larissa Diadkova was bold and slashing. (She is the Russian mezzo who makes a powerhouse of an Azucena. You sit up a little straighter, when she is around.)

The production, by Flimm, was a success. The set was pleasing to the eye and appropriate to the drama. Dress was modern, including tuxedos, a zebra-striped evening gown (or was it a cocktail dress?), and what appeared to be a one-piece bathing suit, with some kind of cape behind it. The angels of death, which gathered as the drama built, were a little much, but I liked that the tops of their wings resembled Klan hoods. This is a crazy opera, and it can use a crazy production—a crazy-intelligent production, which this is.

The conductor was Valery Gergiev, and I have rarely heard him so effective. He handled Strauss's score superbly, with excellent pacing, and just the right nervousness, before leading into outright terror.

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Salome is about the shortest experience you can have in an opera house (something like an hour and forty minutes). With Karita Mattila, it is also about the most memorable. Those who missed Birgit Nilsson in this role should be sorry. Those who will miss Mattila, I dare say, should be sorrier.

Concert note

Wolfgang Sawallisch,
Christoph Eschenbach &
Sir Simon Rattle with the
Philadelphia Orchestra,
Carnegie Hall.

To hear a major orchestra under three eminent conductors in the space of a little more than one month is a privilege. Carnegie Hall was the site on January 13 and 27 and February 23, and the orchestra was Philadelphia's. Two of the conductors—Wolfgang Sawallisch and Christoph Eschenbach—are music directors of the Philadelphia Orchestra; the other, Sir Simon Rattle, was until recently widely believed to be under consideration for the same job, before being named music director of the Berlin Philharmonic. Philadelphia remains one of the few orchestras he guest-conducts (on an every-other-year basis).

The three conductors are quite different in their approaches to music, and each chose works representative of their particular strengths.

Sawallisch's choice (January 13) was Bruckner's Fifth Symphony—an imposing late Romantic work with a strongly upbeat final movement: a tangle of counterpoint and fugue which serves to define Bruckner's compositional preoccupations and which ends in a blaze of brazen glory. An apt choice, therefore, to mark the return of the retired music director (now conductor laureate), as well as a work thoroughly familiar to Sawallisch himself.

Sawallisch arrived in Philadelphia as music director after years as a conductor in Munich, and he has always represented the best of that category known as the Kapellmeister, or solid professional musician. That term usually carries with it a pejorative aura, defining the musicianship as efficient but rarely adventurous or illuminating. In Sawallisch's case, however, it shows itself in its positive features. If Sawallisch's conducting of operas—particularly those of Richard Strauss—has been his greatest asset in Munich, his longtime acquaintance with the whole of the German symphonic tradition resulted in performances of understanding and warmth.

Sawallisch unfolded the richnesses of the Bruckner symphony with a feeling for its structure and its distinctive sound, and the orchestra responded with some of their most persuasive expressive playing, as if the works of Bruckner were as much in their blood as in the blood of the Vienna Philharmonic. It was therefore a memorable tribute both to composer and conductor laureate.

Simon Rattle is of a much younger generation, and his music-making is of quite another kind—brighter-sounding, more alert to the individuality of voices within the orchestra, and generally more extroverted. His concert (January 27) contrasted two Germanic works—the Tenth Symphony (1999–2002) of Hans Werner Henze and the Second of Johannes Brahms. Henze, a German who has lived most of his life in Italy, is a composer more respected than loved or revered, in part because of his own aloofness, and in part because his large output of work is uneven. He is best judged on his many operas, which are as individual and strong a group of works as any in the twentieth century, but he has written well for voice and ballet, and his symphonies have passages of power. The Tenth was commissioned by Paul Sacher, who died before it was completed. Rattle then premiered it with his Birmingham orchestra and subsequently took it to Berlin.

Henze's signature strength, in opera also but certainly in his orchestral music, lies in his sense of color and contrast, and this symphony glories in it—though (as usual)

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his weakness for a jungle of percussion instruments in loud array overbalanced the whole. One could perhaps wish for a greater sense of shape, and a more determined wielding of the blue pencil, but this symphony is worth hearing again. To contrast it with the serene certainties of the Brahms is to examine two sides of a German coin, and Rattle's innate sense of color and highlighting of voices added to the contrast. His somewhat mercurial—and certainly dynamic—presence on the podium is a notable asset for the concertgoer, because, with Rattle, one can never exactly predict what will take place in performance. His questing spirit, in evidence in his adventurous program-making as in his conducting, as well as his plans for the future with Berlin, ensures that Rattle will remain a significant podium presence wherever and whenever he appears.

Dynamic podium presence is also a feature of Christoph Eschenbach, Philadelphia's incoming music director. He can be said to have hit the ground running. He conducts by gyrating and slashing the air with bold strokes, and this power energized the performance of the Mahler Third Symphony, even with the lethargic tempos he selected at times, and despite some tentative orchestral playing (as its result?). He obviously was intent on establishing control over the orchestra with the performance, with the question remaining as to whether, in this symphony especially, this sort of micromanaging was appropriate.

Mahler's Third is the most optimistic, sunniest, and most joyful of Mahler's symphonies. It represents (with its pendant, the Fourth) the outward—at times childlike—humor of the composer, which was to darken and curdle over into the elegaic resignation of the Abschied of *Das Lied von der Erde*, and the harrowing last movement of the Ninth. Of course, this symphony has its clouds as well, most notably in the immensely evocative offstage Posthorn solo of the third movement (gorgeously played!). Its last movement, the noble tribute to "love" (if you want to believe the "program" that Mahler later discarded), which has roots in both Beethoven and, quite clearly, Wagner, can be considered the last pure efflorescence of German Romanticism, and in almost any competent performance is unbearably moving.

Eschenbach allowed that movement its space and its time, while building it to a triumphant yet restrained close. Earlier, he had treated the work as if it was one of the later more neurasthenic symphonies, to its detriment. His excessively slow tempo for the alto song "O Mensch" brought it repeatedly to a standstill, though it presented no legato vocal problems to the soloist, the extraordinary Lorraine Hunt Lieberson.

Eschenbach clearly wants to make an early, forceful entrance as music director of a symphony orchestra with a great and long tradition. The orchestra has been given a fifty million dollar grant from the Annenberg Foundation for additional programming outreach, which will include family concerts on Sundays, interdisciplinary festivals, and the opportunity for opera, with the orchestra in the pit of its Academy of Music (which they own, though they play in the new Verizon Hall). As with Rattle in Berlin, it will be interesting to see what develops with Eschenbach in Philadelphia.

—Patrick J. Smith

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The media

Obligations to "spin"

by James Bowman

At other times, the pressures of editing on a tight deadline and the fundamental belief that a reporter is telling his editor the truth appeared to work in Mr. Kelley's favor.
—From a *New York Times* article on the disgrace of *USA Today* reporter Jack Kelley

Did it indeed? Just imagine that! An editor not only believing but believing *fundamentally* that a reporter he employs is telling him the truth! Whatever next? Hasn't *The New York Times* (or *USA Today*) ever heard of fact-checkers? Do they think we're living back in the days when people were used to easy talk about honor and relationships of trust? Nowadays you don't even get married without signing a pre-nuptial agreement. If you can't trust your wife or husband, what hope is there of trusting a newspaper reporter? Yet the more one looks at it the more one's conviction grows that there is no hope *but* in trust. Put up all the fact-checkers and editorial safeguards you like, there are still just too many ways for a reporter who is determined to deceive you and your readers to get away with it.

That's why I never considered the *Times*'s own little bout of dishonest journalism last year, when young Jayson Blair was found to have falsified several stories over a two- or three-year period, a black mark against the *Times* itself. Many as are that newspaper's faults, in my view, employing Mr. Blair and failing to detect his deceptions for a considerable period of time were not among them. The only deeds worthy of serious censure in the whole episode were those of Mr. Blair himself. It might seem odd, therefore, that the *Times* took a different view. There was an outpouring of agonized retrospection, all of which seemed to assume that the paper's editors were in some significant way to blame for what Mr. Blair had done, and two of them, Howell Raines and Gerald Boyd, the Executive Editor and Managing Editor respectively, were forced to resign.

I have written before in this space of the pleasure journalists have in examining their own conduct and finding it, in certain tightly circumscribed ways, at fault. Remember the orgy of self-criticism that went on over the press's various intrusions into Bill Clinton's sex life in 1998? In that instance—as, indeed, in just about every other case of media self-criticism—the conclusions, in which blame and recommendations for action eventually come to be distributed, stopped just short of the point at which anyone would have had to do anything other than what he was already doing. Being nasty and intrusive continues to be all right for the media so long as, from time to time, various appointed worriers are brought forth to make a point of voicing their regret at how nasty and intrusive the media are being. But in the case of Mr. Blair, there were other reasons for the *Times* and Mr. Raines, especially, to take upon themselves—admittedly in a half-hearted

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and insincere fashion—blame that they did not deserve.

One, of course, had to do with race. Mr. Blair was black. So was Mr. Boyd. Indeed, both of them still are. They are also liberal—as is Mr. Raines, who labors under the additional handicap of being a white Alabamian. To have treated Mr. Blair with the odium he deserved would not have been in the least racist, but the exquisitely sensitive liberal consciences of Mr. Raines and *The New York Times*, whose editorial conscience he had done so much to form in his years as editorial page editor, could not have borne the suspicion that it *might* have been racist. Or *tinged* with racism. Or open in the smallest degree to the *charge* of racism even from such an obviously self-interested party as the contemptible Mr. Blair. That's why in "My Times," Mr. Raines's 20,000 word essay in the May number of the *Atlantic Monthly* purporting to explain his downfall, he hardly mentions Mr. Blair. Instead, he wants us to believe that his resignation was brought about by jealousy, resentment, and the conservative *Times* culture that was mindlessly resistant to the beneficial changes he was trying to impose on it.

In the context Jayson Blair is reduced to a mere pretext for Raines's enemies to push him out, which makes Blair himself appear oddly innocent, "a troubled young reporter," as Raines puts it. Troubled? Troubled be damned, Sir! Haven't we all got troubles? And weren't Blair's mostly brought on by himself? And what, in any case, do his troubles, severe or not, deserved or not, have to do with his unprofessional, dishonest, treacherous, and despicable behavior? Even apart from our squeamishness about using such words these days, and especially such words about a black man, it is easy to see that Howell Raines has another reason for letting Blair and his now-famous troubles off the hook. The people he really resents are those, most of them unnamed in the article, who resisted his regime of change at the *Times*. To a man of Raines's colossal *amour propre*, there must be something disgustingly ridiculous about having been the victim of a mere prankster like Blair. Obviously, if he must be a martyr, it is far better to be a martyr as the man who tried to bring Change to the *Times* and was defeated by the dark forces of reaction.

For this it must have been worth taking some of the weight of responsibility off the worthless shoulders of Jayson Blair. Accordingly, the *Atlantic* piece shunts Blair aside in favor of embarrassing braggadocio and bogus mea culpas and half-apologies. "I don't think I worked hard enough to stiffen his [Arthur Sulzberger's] spine for the survival battle we could have won," writes Raines in a typically insincere spirit of contrition. He was clearly not exactly a humble person to begin with, and this is not the memoir of a man who has been chastened by experience. "At one point when Gerald [Boyd] and I were meeting with several masthead editors about the Blair problem, someone used the term 'damage control.' I told the group that we were not in the damage-control business. 'Full disclosure' would be our approach, I said. I wouldn't change that decision today even though the story as published started the unraveling that cost Gerald and me our jobs."

What a hero! he would presumably have us murmur in admiration. It shows that, nearly a year after having departed from the *Times*, he himself is still so far imbued with the paper's spirit of self-importance that he is seeking ways to turn the Blair affair into an occasion for self-congratulation. To a man with a sense of irony, this might be a tip-off as to why he found it so difficult to change the editorial culture. Meanwhile Jayson Blair, kindly let off the hook by those who have most reason to despise him, is seeking to capitalize on his notoriety in order to sell a book he has written called *Burning Down My Master's House*—as if he had led a slave rebellion. He, like Raines, has found a way to make himself the hero of his own story, knowing that the celebrity culture will look with indulgence on even so self-serving an account as this so long as he can claim to be a victim.

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Blair's memoir is beneath contempt, but Raines's has a more comical aspect, especially in its sublime unconsciousness of the absurdity of his apparent belief that the world should and would be more outraged at the reactionaries who prevented him, Howell Raines, from introducing new and revolutionary measures to increase the appeal of *The New York Times* to a more youthful demographic cohort than that a liar and a cheat would use his betrayal of his friends and benefactors as a ticket to money and fame. Still, we may find the smile dying on our lips when we reflect that, within the journalistic world anyway, he's probably right. Or, if they don't care very much about what Raines could or could not accomplish at the *Times*, they care even less about Jayson Blair's turning himself into a minor celebrity.

Why shouldn't he? Fame, even of Blair's kind, implies the right to use it to one's own advantage. It would seem hard indeed upon him or his fellow fabulist, Stephen Glass, who has also lately been trying to sell a book—his an acknowledged work of fiction—to deny them the chance to scratch a living in the demimonde of celebrity to which their amusing lies have now relegated them. Some such consideration may also have been at work in the case of the former counter-terrorism coordinator in the Clinton and Bush administrations, Richard Clarke who, like Blair, sought to capitalize upon his betrayal of friends, colleagues and benefactors. At any rate, there was a widespread reluctance on the part of the media who greeted Clarke's testimony before the commission investigating the security failures behind the terror attacks of September 11th, 2001 with an embarrassing outpouring of hero-worship even to mention that he was hardly a disinterested witness.

To be sure, there were other reasons for not mentioning it. Since last summer, large portions of the media have abandoned even the pretense of political neutrality as between President Bush and his various prospective opponents. An ever more vociferous media chorus has tried to turn into full-blown scandals a whole string of non-stories, including the failure to prevent the terror attacks of September 11th, 2001, the allegation that Bush was AWOL for part or all of his last year of National Guard service in 1972–1973, his use of images of 9/11 in television ads for his political campaign, the naming of Valerie Plame as a CIA agent by Robert Novak, and the allegation by her husband that her name had been leaked in order to punish him for an investigation into a dud lead about Saddam Hussein's quest for fissile materials in Niger—which was itself part of the biggest would-be scandal of all, the faulty intelligence about Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq. The last was at least a real story, but it was one which was not easily turned into a scandal about President Bush, since virtually every intelligence service in the world, to say nothing of the United Nations, made the same mistake he did about the WMDs.

So in their unrelenting attempts to discredit the incumbent administration, the media turned back, in March and April, to a promising runner from last year—and the year before that—the intimation that it could somehow be held responsible for the attacks of 9/11. Clarke's testimony before the committee supposedly investigating this question of responsibility happened to coincide with the publication of his book, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror* and an interview on "60 Minutes" broadcast on CBS—whose parent company, Viacom, also owns Simon and Schuster, the publishers of the book—in order to popularize his most sensational allegations. These all pretty much boiled down the same allegation, namely that the only person in the Bush administration who took the terrorist threat at all seriously before September 11th was one R. Clarke. Like Jayson Blair and Howell Raines, Clarke thus made himself the hero of his own story. Moreover, like the former he betrayed those to whom he owed a duty of loyalty in order to do so; like the latter he had such an exalted idea of his own importance that the un-

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seemliness of such self-puffery never seems to have occurred to him.

But if the media's interest in buying into Clarke's self-promotion was clearly political, they were enabled to exercise it with such a free hand because of a tacit understanding that it is bad manners to ask *cui bono?* of a journalistic source who is in the process of turning himself into a celebrity. News organizations like CBS which would never dream of paying for information directly have no scruple whatsoever about stuffing the pockets of the likes of Richard Clarke, to say nothing of their own corporate masters, so long as there is a book or movie deal with which to effect the pixillation of their indecent exposure. Clarke could not have failed to know and take advantage of this sort of media courtesy. Two years ago when he testified to his confidence in the administration of which he was then a part no one in the media took any notice. It did not require any great degree of perspicacity on his part to see that the choice before him was to be loyal and obscure or disloyal and an instant celebrity, fawned over by the likes of Maureen Dowd and Tina Brown, with vastly increased earning power.

You wouldn't have to be as completely without shame or scruple as Jayson Blair or Stephen Glass to be tempted into making such a bargain as that—particularly if it came with a promise on the part of the tempter not to be so vulgar as to make any public reference as to what was in it for either of them. Nor could the tempters of the media have been unaware of what they were offering to the likes of Mr. Clarke—and for what they were offering it. All their subsequent coverage of his allegedly "damaging" testimony about the Bush administration's lack of a sense of urgency about terrorism in the weeks before 9/11—and who, besides Richard Clarke himself, was *not* lacking a sense of urgency about terrorism in those weeks?—was therefore utterly disingenuous. Yet in all the reams of coverage of Clarke's remarks, you had to look long and hard to find anyone willing to point out the difference between such remarks from a disinterested party and from a man who stood to grow rich and famous from making them. Whether you think he was right in what he said the first time, when he found Bush's behavior impeccable, or the second time, when he found it culpable, you would think that at the very least it was worth pointing this out as a caveat every time you quote the man.

But it was pointed out as a caveat virtually never. On one of the few occasions when it was, when Tim Russert asked Clarke if he would donate his royalties to the 9/11 victims he had so ostentatiously and unnecessarily apologized to, he answered that he had long planned to make "a substantial contribution" to the victims and that his future livelihood was threatened by the resentments of the administration at his betrayal. Only, of course, he didn't call it that. This signal act of generosity juxtaposed with the administration's presumed vindictiveness was treated by Tina Brown as yet another example of her hero's high sense of principle—the movie deal for Clarke's book, which is being "developed" by some of the people who made *All the President's Men*, was announced a few days later—but I was more struck by his answer to another of Mr. Russert's questions. This was the one about the reason for the discrepancy between Clarke's recent criticisms of the Bush administration and his public support of it two years ago. To this, Clarke appeared to think it was a sufficient answer to say that "I was told to spin it in a positive way."

> Now, the question is: Why do you do that? I thought Pat Buchanan, a conservative Republican, former White House aide, put it pretty well last night when he was asked the same question. He said, "When you're in the White House, you may disagree with policy." But when you're asked to defend that policy, you defend it, if you're a special assistant to the president, as Pat Buchanan was and as I was. I had a choice. I could have done what I was asked to do and defend them when they were being criticized for not having done enough

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> before September 11 or I could have resigned. Why didn't I resign? Because I believed it was very, very important for the United States to develop a plan to secure its cyberspace from terrorism. And the president had asked me to do that. I did it. I didn't get it done until February of 2003. Here it is: The National Plan to Secure Cyberspace, which the president thanked me for effusively. I wouldn't have been able to do this—important document if I had quit on the date that you suggest. And so there's no inconsistency. I said the things that I was told to say. They're true. We did consider these things but no decisions were taken. And that's the point. It was an important issue for them but not an urgent issue. They had a hundred meetings before they got around to having one on terrorism.

As an apology for lying—that is, deliberately misrepresenting the true state of his understanding of the Bush administration's anti-terrorism efforts—that beats anything Jayson Blair could have come up with. Perhaps only Howell Raines could have rivaled Clarke's monumental self-conceit in claiming that his personal importance, not to say indispensability, to the war on terror was the only excuse he needed for disregarding the principle of good faith. But the best is yet to come. When Russert followed up by asking, "But if you were willing to go forward, and, as you say, 'spin' on behalf of the president, then why shouldn't people now think that this book is also spin? Why should people believe you?" To this Clark replied, "Because I have no obligation anymore to spin."

In other words, the obligation to "spin"—which is to say lie—is expected on all sides to be among the routine duties of a public servant. Once you are out of government you have the luxury, especially if you have a book to sell, of telling the truth. Or "the truth," since we are to understand it as signifying such a version of the truth as may be as serviceable to yourself as the former version of the truth was meant to be serviceable to your political masters. This is worse than an apology for lying. It is a denial that the truth even exists. All is spin. And if all is spin, why shouldn't a government functionary paid to spin on behalf of others apply his skills to spinning on behalf of the media consensus for a great deal more money and the adulation of such simpletons as Tina Brown? Jayson Blair, who won't make nearly so much money out of his book or, probably, get a movie deal anything like as fizzy as Clarke's, was a piker by comparison. Maybe that's why Howell Raines feels sorry for him.

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Fiction chronicle

Not to comment, but to illustrate

by Max Watman

I recently saw a man wearing a t-shirt that said "I bring nothing to the table." These t-shirts should be handed out at the orientation session of every MFA program in the country. Not as a rebuke, but as celebration and encouragement. It is not always a new angle, or a new approach, or a new gimmick that your book needs. Don't add something just for the sake of adding. That's destructive. How about bringing nothing to the table? How about thinking *inside* the damn box every once in a while?

Andrew Sean Greer, when considering and plotting out his book *The Confessions of Max Tivoli*, clearly thought the family itself—all that malarkey that occupied Austen, Tolstoy, etc.—not quite meaty enough.[1] The family, well there's something to that, but what can one bring to the table? What if . . . what if the protagonist was a frog? No, that'll never work. What if he ages backwards! Lightbulb above the head, agent on the telephone, the whole shebang.

It is possible that if this trick had been smoothly executed, if the character, having established himself as a backwards aging man, settled into a complicated and well-thought-out family/love story, it might be pretty fun, might even be welcome. But for Greer, the backwards-aging man is a crutch. It's his substitute.

The Confessions begins in the playground; Max Tivoli sits in a sandbox, an old man in a youngster's body. "There is a dead body to explain. A woman three times loved. A friend betrayed. And a boy long sought for." It is 1930.

"We all hate what we become." He writes, asking forgiveness for his childish handwriting. He is sixty, but he is losing his coordination. "I have seen women staring at themselves in restaurant mirrors. . . . I have seen men back from war." He feels the need to apologize to a young boy named Sammy. He looks the same age as Sammy, and has contrived to live and school with him.

Tivoli was born in 1871 in San Francisco. The doctor declared him "Rhinocerine," a word Tivoli is convinced was made up on the spot. He makes a friend in a young boy named Hughie, one of the few folks who know him for what he really is. He spends most of his time passing himself off according to his mother's advice: "Be what they think you are."

Much of the meat of the book comes from Tivoli trying to pass. Looking fifty-five, he is inside a boy of fifteen. Looking ten, he's a sour and spent sixty. There's an interesting moment when his appearance and his age coincide—at thirty-five he looks thirty-five.

What could be an interesting, even glamorous, adventure is crippled in two ways.

Greer keeps Tivoli in a very small world. The book is a domestic love story. When Tivoli goes to war, we skip it. He and

1 *The Confessions of Max Tivoli*, by Andrew Sean Greer; Farrar Straus and Giroux, 288 pages, $23.

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Hughie go driving around the country, but the country is not much explored. It's an intentional move on Greer's part. This story takes place inside. A note left for Tivoli is "on custard stationary on the silver tray, beside the toast. One edge of it was dark with spilled coffee." Tight focus is kept on the small details. We get lots of tea things, gaslights, and rugs— the whole novel seems to take place in the parlor.

Which is fitting, I suppose, considering that Tivoli is trapped inside himself. His confession purports to tell the story of how each of us is the love of someone's life, and how frequently we screw that up. It is more the story of those trapped within themselves. An old madam wants to pass as a lady. A gay man passed as heterosexual, yearning to come out. Everyone is trapped inside something.

But it is an opportunity lost. I found myself wanting him to travel: Go to Singapore! I encouraged him. They won't care! Just keep moving, and you'll be fine. But the only thing he'll move for is Alice, his true love.

The second unfortunate result of the sandbox confessional is that Tivoli's voice, to us, is always old. These pages were supposed to have been found in a box. They are his diaries. Much of the book concerns itself with time, and people's relationship to it, but to us, Tivoli, though he might reflect on youth, is static. When he writes of his conception (with alarming detail) he writes that at 1:28 his "mother's technical girlhood ended. . . . And then—at 2:05 exactly (well endured, my young and eager father)—her lover cried out in ecstasy." That is the voice of experience laid right over the image of conception. So for us there is no progress. To our ear, Tivoli is always an old man. Why should he begin as one?

The backwards aging, then, is reduced to a prop. It allows Greer to fill pages with one-liners about how Hughie, now masquerading as Tivoli's father, should teach his son to drive elsewhere. It allows for Tivoli to deceive the love of his life three times.

But couldn't we have a man deceive a woman three times without the added distraction? Can't Greer imagine a way to write of botched love affairs and secret affections without all this?

The Dew Breaker, by Edwidge Danticat, is a series of vaguely interconnected stories concerning Haitians in America and Haiti.[2] The opening story promises a rich tapestry of betrayal and violence, which the book fails to deliver.

We meet Ms. Bienamé and her father on a rather unlikely journey to Florida where they will deliver a sculpture the daughter has carved to a Haitian television star.

The sculpture is "a three-foot mahogany figure of my father naked, kneeling on a half-foot square base, his back arched like the curve of a crescent moon, his downcast eyes fixed on his very long fingers and the large palms of his hands. . . . It was the way I had imagined him in prison."

Mr. Bienamé had been in prison in Haiti, but not in the way his daughter imagines. He was not a captive. He'd been a guard—one of the dreaded macoutes. He was a "dew breaker" (they came in the morning, while the dew was still on the ground), a torturer, a thug.

In the last story, perhaps the only really successful story in the collection, we see him younger, still in Haiti. The scene opens on him lounging in his vehicle. "He came to kill the preacher. So he arrived early, extra early, a whole two hours before the evening service would begin."

The preacher is a revolutionary, a rabble-rouser. He tells stories on his radio show about "brave men and women in the Bible who'd fought tyranny and nearly died."

The preacher's death warrant has come down from Duvalier. The dew breaker enjoys his work: "He liked questioning the prisoners, teaching them to play zo and besik, stapling clothespins to their ears as they lost and removing them as he let them win, convincing them that their false vic-

2 *The Dew Breaker*, by Edwidge Danticat; Knopf, 256 pages, $22.

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tories would save their lives. He liked to paddle them with braided cowhide, stand on their cracking backs and jump up and down like a drunk on a trampoline, pound a rock on the protruding bone behind their earlobes until they couldn't hear the orders he was shouting at them." But he is tired of this life, is already saving money to leave. Still, he will carry out his order.

After things go very wrong with the preacher, he travels to America and changes his name. But he is a marked man. He is haunted, and the scar on his face serves to remind him of his past. His past haunts his wife, too.

> There was no way to escape this dread anymore, this pendulum between regret and forgiveness, this fright that the most important relationships of her life were always on the verge of being severed or lost, that the people closest to her were always disappearing.

But there is little of this haunting in the pages in between.

In "The Bridal Seamstress" a young reporter for the "Haitian American Weekly" interviews a woman who makes wedding gowns. She imagines that the dew breaker lives on her block in Far Rockaway. "This man, wherever I rent or buy a house in this city, I find him, living on my street."

But most of the chapter is spent drinking coffee, and inside the head of the silly cub reporter, Aline, who comes to the realization that people in the world suffer. "Maybe there were hundreds, even thousands, of people like this, men and women chasing fragments of themselves long lost to others. Maybe Aline herself was one of them." Aline wants to write about these people, and so does Danticat.

But I'm no more sure of who these hundreds, perhaps thousands, are than I am what it means to chase fragments of one's self "long lost to others." Haitians? Victims of torture?

Danticat wants resonance, but she won't work for it. She relies instead on the atmosphere, and the false richness of the exotic language and rhythm of Haiti. In the middle of the coup that overthrew Duvalier, a young man explains the difference between long-tailed and short-tailed monkeys. The president for life had "gone on television to deny the rumors, saying he was as 'unyielding as a monkey's tail.'"

> Monkeys with short tails live on the ground . . . and those with longer tails make their homes closer to the sky, in high trees. Some tree monkeys have tails that are longer than their bodies, tails that they use to swing from tree to tree. We'd both laughed, wondering which kind of monkey's tail our president imagined himself to be.
>
> "He was a short-tailed one, but now he's a long-tailed one . . . looking for another tree."

No doubt, someone thinks that stuff like "make their homes closer to the sky" is "richly evocative." But it isn't. It's utterly false. Just like the repetition of the word "tail," it is meant to lull us into a folksy acceptance.

Danticat peppers the book with these exotics: "Claude was a palannit, a night talker, one of those who spoke their nightmares out loud to themselves." It is not the "palannit" that is the giveaway here, it is the repetition and the use of "one of those." "One of those" makes you feel as if a wise old Haitian woman is telling you about people.

When she is not relying on exoticism, she is relying on the interweaving of the stories, the presence of the dew breaker, whose stories bookend this collection. The implied tapestry, however, is not there. The threads that are supposed to interlock do not. Danticat has banked on a support system that she failed to provide for herself, and most of the book feels empty because of it.

I don't mean to say that the exotic has no place in books. I only mean to suggest that it has not a weight of its own. A foreign or exciting rhythm can make a speech pleasing to the ear, but it does not grant that speech

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depth. There must be a structure on which the writer might hang his trinkets.

Thomas Mallon, in *Bandbox*, raided the junk store for all the quirks and details he could get his hands on about jazz age New York.[3] We know where we are immediately. Mallon's opening line: "Cuddles Houlihan got clipped by the vodka bottle as it exited the pneumatic tube."

Joe Harris, his boss, editor-in-chief of the men's monthly *Bandbox*, had "at this late, sozzled hour . . . mistakenly fed the interoffice mail chute not the translucent canister containing his angry communication to Cuddles, but the still-half-full, six-dollar quart of hooch he was regularly supplied with by the countess in the fact-checking department."

In a fictional world rumored to mirror pretty closely that of the late Art Cooper of *GQ* and David Granger of *Esquire*, Joe Harris's best senior editor has gone off and started a magazine of his own. Now, they find themselves in competition for eyeballs, ad dollars, and scoops. "The war between the two men and magazines was still a matter of novelty jousting with novelty—in a time when novelty itself had lost its newness."

Mallon, like a variety-show juggler, starts tossing up stories: perhaps too many, if the truth be told. They are at times hard to remember, and a few of them fail to fire. There is a complicated proto-PETA subplot that promises much comedy (a warehouse full of exotic animals really ought to go somewhere) but ultimately seems invented only to give one minor character a way out of the book in the closing pages.

Most of Mallon's yarns work out much better; throughout, he is funny, confident, and bright. His writing is snappy: at an editorial meeting, one editor is describing the pieces he's acquired "like a weary magician extracting rabbits for his colleagues who couldn't even find the top hat." Not only is it a wonderful simile, it keeps perfectly in line with the atmosphere of the book. Another man's "insides and brain were now popping like one long glorious Fourth of July."

Things are whirling out of control over at *Bandbox*, the staff is losing its edge, and hooch, sex, and drugs have taken their toll—everyone is getting dull. Into this vivid world marches a rube from Indiana named John. An avid reader of *Bandbox*, he knows how to compliment people, and finds himself sharing a table with his heroes—the writers and editors.

> No one at the table had interrupted John's excited narrative to ask why he had come to the city, or what circumstances had preceded his departure from Indiana. It was, to these diners, a simple given that everywhere else was a place you left, that each person arrived in Manhattan like an appliance ready to be taken out of its box and plugged in. This nice boy was just one more shiny creature off destiny's assembly line.

Destiny's assembly line has quite a trip in store for John, soon re-named "Shep" by the staffers. He gets himself packed into the trunk of a gangster's car and shipped out of town, and in so doing, offers them just the story they need to galvanize their own floundering careers and save the magazine.

Add to the kid and the gangster a cocaine-addled omnisexual male model, and the Italian restauranteur who gives him drugs in hopes of one day gaining his love. Add a made judge and a bevy of trollops, self-interested writers and editors. And it all fits together, "Just like Scanties!" (a "detestably unseductive piece of modern apparel").

It's never as tight and true as the masterpiece of journalism comedy, *Scoop*, nor is *Bandbox* ever quite as well put together as P. G. Wodehouse, but it seems to me that to call those examples to mind at all is a triumph.

True to form, all are delivered exactly what they deserve by the closing chapter. The good and the innocent triumph, those

3 *Bandbox: A Novel*, by Thomas Mallon; Pantheon Books, 320 pages, $24.95.

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who have worked hard are rewarded. The venal and manipulative are destroyed. Wedding bells will soon be chiming for lovers who have finally found their place with one another.

Although Tom Perrotta's capacity for doubt is endless, he comes on as understanding. He appears to create characters with which one might sympathize. Even his child molesters are not grotesques.

In *Little Children*, one of the threads we follow through a suburban landscape of playgrounds and swimming pools is the story of a sex offender recently released from prison.[4] He exposed himself to a girl scout, and is suspected in the disappearance of a girl. He spends most of the book at home with his mother, smoking and watching television. Perrotta's sympathy extends even to him: "It was weird, but Ronnie actually liked going to the hospital. People were friendly there. They smiled at him in the elevators and corridors, and treated him as if he had as much right to be there as they did, an attitude he didn't often encounter in public places." You have to remind yourself that the sympathy you feel is for a child molester.

Ronnie is there for added suspense, and to put into relief the subtler child abuse—and obsessing affectionate objectification—that is going on throughout the book. The moms are all either smothering or uninterested, the fathers are mostly at work. The children are just there, something one must care for in the way that one must put gas in the car or vacuum the rug. These parents fixate on being parents, but they don't do much actual parenting. Occasionally, they are the recipients of affection, usually from the parent with whom the child spends less time. One mother is freshly surprised every time she realizes that her friend Jean actually likes her daughter.

Sarah lost her girlfriend and made a wreck of graduate school, so she got a job at Starbucks. It was a miserable life until a wannabe swinger with a deep affection for internet porn asked her if her day was going as badly as his and she chucked all her Women's Studies mumbo jumbo and bisexual proclivities and married him.

Now, she must remind herself to "think like an anthropologist. *I'm a researcher studying the behavior of boring suburban women. I am not a boring suburban woman myself.*"

Her child Lucy is nothing but a burden to her.

> If any of the other mothers had asked how it was that Sarah, of all people, had ended up married, living in the suburbs, and caring full-time for a small child, she would have blamed it all on a moment of weakness.

Into her life walks an equally stressed father, Todd. Referred to by the playground mommies as "The Prom King," Todd is a physically fit, blond, frat boy pretending to study for his third try at the bar exam, though he tends to spend more attention on a group of skateboarders than he does on his law books. He and his wife don't seem to get along anymore; she's much more interested in having their son in bed than she is in having him.

Obviously, such a situation is due for a mixing up, and a little suburban adultery fits the bill perfectly.

Sarah "picked up *Madame Bovary* and discovered an entirely different novel from the one that existed in her memory."

Perrotta makes excellent jokes.

A dinner party at which Todd and Sarah are attempting to conceal their affair from their spouses ends with Todd's wife hiding on the floor under the table, staring at the nail polish on Sarah's toes. "She didn't really want to get up just yet, to sit in her chair and carry on a civil conversation with the woman who'd stolen her husband." She stays under there for way too long. "'I'm fine,' she said, still on her hands and knees, still staring dumbstruck at the other woman's toes."

At church, a fight between the child

4 *Little Children: A Novel*, by Tom Perrotta; St. Martin's Press, 368 pages, $24.95.

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molester and another suburban train wreck takes on vaudevillian characteristics, pants around the ankles, ear twisting: the whole shebang.

One realizes, however, that these jokes are somewhat cinematic. And with that realization, the book begins to disintegrate. The characters are simple. Their problems, and attempted solutions to those problems, are predictable. Sarah's husband's interests are a little off the map, but other than that people tend to deliver rather pat little packages of thought. Sarah displays a fair amount of the same idiocy of which she accuses the other mommies, it's just of a different stripe.

Discussing *Madame Bovary*, one woman says "I found it refreshing to read about a woman reclaiming her sexuality." And another says, "Is that a nice way of saying she's a slut?" And another: "I'm tempted to go so far as to say that, in her own strange way, Emma Bovary is a feminist."

What becomes clear is that they are all idiots. Everyone in the book is an idiot. All of Perrotta's sympathy is a sham. He gives each of them just enough flesh and weakness for us to relate to them, and then he calmly strafes them. He is cynical beyond belief. But cynicism should not be confused with depth. Attacking the foibles of modern American suburban parents is shooting fish in a barrel.

Imad Rahman's debut collection of short stories, *I Dream of Microwaves*, springs from a single idea.[5] What if basically everyone in the world were an actor?

The protagonist throughout is named Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. "I was trying to get my mind off drinking by pouring hot coffee on my arm when I got a letter out of the blue from an old girlfriend, Eileen. There was a one-way Greyhound ticket to Ohio and a handwritten note." He had been working for "America's Most Wanted," playing criminals in their re-enactments of crimes. But there was not enough darkness in his heart. "The casting director, a forgettable (makeup, jumpsuits) woman named Janice, was concerned that I played the parts too soft, left too much room for audience sympathy, and did not, or could not, precipitate enough malice." He wants to add subtext, let his characters be tormented by demons. She wants monsters.

Kareem is going nowhere, and he wants to improve himself. "I was thinking that Ohio was as good a place as any, that Ohio was neutral, like Switzerland." He calls his agent: "I'm not drinking any more. . . . I'm not drinking any less."

It turns out that Eileen's motivations are not entirely pure. Her sister has married a cannibal. Actually, he's an ex-football hotshot turned actor named Buzz Johnson who is playing a cannibal. Her grandmother wants to donate money to charity, $35,000, and, for 10 percent, Buzz is acting the part of the "charity" to which Eileen's sister believes the money should be given. "If Cecelia's bringing in her cannibal, I can't simply show up empty handed. I'm on committees; I've made promises; there are people depending on me." She wants him to be Bosnian. "I need for you to be tragic and burdened with grief. I need for you to deliver some monologues steeped in despair. This is it, the role of a lifetime."

Exaggerated to absurd heights, for sure, but when two girls bring home guys to win the approval/money of the grandmother, of course it's a show, of course they are actors. Rahman has taken the presentation of self, the "best face forward" and made it a self-conscious act, a real act. If all the world is a stage, then everybody is acting.

Things don't go as well for Kareem in Ohio as he might have hoped. The next story, the funniest in the book, finds him deserted by Eileen. She's run off to Brazil, where she's saving piranhas after stabbing Kareem in the leg.

He is working as "Zima Zorro at the Ancient Mariner Sports Bar and Grill." "I had to wear a three-piece corduroy suit with a black polyester cape and a floppy sword. A

5 *I Dream of Microwaves*, by Imad Rahman; Farrar Straus and Giroux, 256 pages, $23.

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pencil-thin mustache snaked around my upper lip." His job is to sit around the bar looking "wonderfully cool and refreshed as [he] chugged elegantly on a six-pack of Zima."

One day at work he finds that he has some competition: the Red Bull Matador. "There was something genuine about him that made me feel like a phony."

Kareem rents out his house to a pornography studio. It's his birthday. "I did some grocery shopping at the liquor store."

The jokes come fast in this collection. Everyone is a tragedy, everyone is phony. A character in the story "Real, Actual Life" (in which Kareem is teamed up with Valentina as hard-boiled pursuers of those who keep video tapes out too long) speaks only by quoting movies. Even when she screams, she is quoting Jamie Lee Curtis in *Halloween*.

It's all show business. Kareem in a tight spot, forgetting his lines in a traveling Shakespeare company in Karachi, quotes Brando "choosing style over substance." When local clerics raid the show, Rahman writes, "They had righteous indignation down to an art."

"We're actors . . . not people."

Everyone—a doorman:

> Apparently they'd been through the same unsuccessful audition for a network pilot a few years back. It was pitched as *Reservoir Dogs* meets *Stand by Me* psychodrama, to be shot Dogma style with hand-held cameras and no artificial lighting.

When Kareem finally decides not to act and goes after a job as a dog walker, it turns out that he is, in fact, playing a dog walker in a homegrown "reality" show. When he pretends to be Mexican, people ask him to pretend to be Arab so they can catch some terrorists.

It's a little relentless, this idea, and might have been better served if Rahman had simply stapled the thing together a little tighter and made it a novel. Regardless, it is gutsy and funny. Rahman has a brilliant sense of the absurd. He writes a kind of calm Beckett—not the grad school Beckett, all earnest and intense, but the Beckett of the short stories, the Beckett that was inspired by Buster Keaton movies to write out the horrible in laughter and farce.

Collections by Stuart Dybek come along infrequently, very infrequently. They are worth waiting for. Dybek is one of the best fiction writers working today. He writes without pretense, without artifice. Never does he drop the reader: no matter how weird things get, his easy, steady prose brings you right along. His new collection is titled *I Sailed with Magellan*.[6] Here is a collection of interconnected stories firing on all eight cylinders.

The loose focus of the book is Perry Katzek. He writes these stories, and stars in them himself with his brother Mick, his father Sir, his Moms, his Uncle Lefty, and a neighborhood full of barkeeps (the one armed Zip), mobsters (Joe, the hitman, haunted by ex-girlfriends in a haze of sleeplessness and booze), former masked wrestlers, Ralphie the sick little boy, not expected to survive, miraculously struggling through to his eighth birthday. The lives are loosely intertwined, as if the book itself is a neighborhood; the neighbors are always showing up in each other's stories.

Dybek moves us from Perry's youth, which he spent standing on the bars of Chicago's corner taverns, singing "Ol' Man River" for free root beer for himself and free boilermakers for his Uncle Lefty; to his adolescence, in "Je Reviens" where he pilfers a bottle of perfume he sees a woman trying in Marshall Fields and follows her to a hotel in an attempt to give her it as a gift, only to learn that she is not a guest of the hotel, but a mistress, or a prostitute; to him as a young man, keen on Kerouac, trying to save money to go to Mexico with his friend Stosh and cooking up a plan to steal orchids and sell them. The flowers they case turn out to be irises.

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6 *I Sailed with Magellan*, by Stuart Dybeck; Picador, 320 pages, $14.

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But summarizing Dybek's stories does not do them justice. They are too graceful and gentle to be summed up.

Consider this scene in "Blue Boy": A procession of the disabled from the parish emerged from the alley and join a parade,

> a couple of World War II vets, mainstays from the bar at the VFW Club, one with a prosthetic hook and the other with no discernible wound other than the alcoholic staggers; and Trib, the blind newspaper vendor; and a guy who delivered pulp circulars, known only as —what else?—the Gimp, pushing his wheelchair for support; and Howdy, who'd been named after Howdy Doody because his palsy caused him to move like a marionette with tangled strings.
>
> It was a parade of at most a dozen, but it seemed larger—enough of a showing so that the onlookers could imagine the battalions of wounded soldiers who weren't there, and the victims of accidents, industrial and otherwise, the survivors of polio and strokes, all the exiles who avoided the streets. . . . Maria Savoy who'd been lighting a water heater when it exploded, or Agnes Lutensky.

He moves from the universal to the specific (battalions of soldiers right down to Agnes Lutensky). He evokes the whole neighborhood feeling; Perry knows all these people by name, it is an urban scene, a Chicago scene. At times, I'm not even sure why I'm so moved by these digressive, almost impressionistic stories, but they work.

He writes a whole subtle world. His characters end at impasses, they stand at thresholds, they learn something. His style is divergent. We learn a lifetime of Mick's history while he stands, back in the old neighborhood, listening to a Mexican gang kid ask him what he wants.

The gangster comes to threaten the barkeep, and the barkeep wants to stand up to him. The gangster, in turn, is hassled by his boss, and by his waking dreamstate. They are not victims, not in the way that Danticat would write victims. We are not to feel sorry for them. But they are not the winners of the world, either. They are tossed around their neighborhood, tossed around this book.

Dybek knows the rhythm of his streets and his voices. He can put them to use. His fiction is subtle, strikingly original, and brilliant. He never pushes too hard for effect, and he never lets you down.

These are elusive stories. One is not entirely sure what to think. These days, where authorial intention and opinion are so easy to spot, where writers hang little flags on the characters they use to make points, it is refreshing to see a writer so involved in the art. He is carefully, subtly putting together human emotions, not to make a point, not to disapprove or champion, not to comment, but to illustrate.

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Books

Why we won

by Marc Arkin

Most Americans think of 1776 as a glorious year in revolutionary history, capped off when the Founders declared independence to the peals of Philadelphia's Liberty Bell. Indeed, as the summer of 1776 approached, the country did have much to celebrate. The war that began at Lexington Green on April 19, 1775 had gone suprisingly well. For almost a year, citizen militia had inflicted heavy damage to British Regulars and Loyalist forces in a succession of engagements: Lexington and Concord in April, Ticonderoga in May, Bunker Hill in June, and Virginia's Great Bridge in December, culminating in the withdrawal of British forces from Boston in March 1776. Unfortunately, 1776 was also the year in which the nation—and its revolution—was very nearly stillborn.

Notwithstanding the brave words of July 4, during the five months that followed the Declaration of Independence, American forces lost every battle they fought. They were driven from Long Island to Westchester, and then successively across the Hudson and Delaware Rivers into Pennsylvania. Manhattan became a Loyalist enclave, hosting British regimental balls. New England was under threat as a British fleet conquered Rhode Island and occupied the city of Newport without firing a shot. New Jersey was overrun by British and Hessian forces in a horrific campaign of rapine and pillage; many of its dispirited inhabitants—including one signer of the Declaration—gave up the patriot cause and swore oaths of allegiance to the Crown.

As the losses piled on, the American army suffered staggering casualties. At the battle of Fort Washington in upper Manhattan alone, 2,800 men were lost—some of them put to the sword after they surrendered—as General Washington watched helplessly from a vantage point across the Hudson on the New Jersey Palisades. By winter, the army was reduced to 10 percent of its original size, and many of the remaining troops intended to go home when their enlistments were up at the end of the year.

In the face of this "cataract of disaster," George Washington hit upon an audacious plan to turn the tide of war. On Christmas night, 1776, he led a force of 2,400 men across the ice-choked Delaware River, into the teeth of a vicious blizzard, a two-day nor'easter so severe that Washington almost aborted the operation. After marching all night through the storm, they attacked and defeated a garrison of 1,500 Hessian regulars at Trenton. The storm gave the American attack an element of surprise; it concealed their approach and interrupted patrols by the Hessian sentries, already exhausted from days of fending off guerilla attacks from local irregulars.

A week later, having persuaded his veterans to stay past their enlistment dates through a combination of moral suasion and a ten dollar bounty in hard coin, Washington set out to re-establish an American

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presence in New Jersey. Recrossing the Delaware—under conditions even worse than the first time—on January 2, Washington's men withstood a fierce counterattack by British Regulars led by General Cornwallis on the outskirts of Trenton. Seemingly trapped in their defensive position, the Americans stole away under cover of night, made a fifteen-mile march over miraculously frozen ground—the road had been knee-deep mud the day before—to Princeton. There, the exhausted troops encountered and defeated two British regiments rushing to reinforce Trenton. Victorious, Washington slipped away with his men, eventually finding winter quarters in Morristown. To the British eyes, Washington had suddenly "shown himself both a Fabius and Camillus," his march an unexpected "prodigy of generalship."

It is this campaign—nine days that saved the revolution—that forms the core of David Hackett Fischer's marvellous new book, *Washington's Crossing*.[1] I am not a great fan of military history, but this is one of the most engaging—even exciting—works of history that I have read in years. Professor Fischer—who, incidentally, began his career chronicling the Federalist party in works like *The Revolution of American Conservatism* (1976)—has an extraordinary gift for storytelling. He has crafted a genuine page-turner out of an iconic event, highlighting the importance of chance and individual decisions in the formation of history. Along the way he dispels more than a few misconceptions; among them, the Hessian soldiers were not sleeping off a Christmas hangover when the Americans struck, and the American army was surprisingly well-provisioned during the winter campaign. I might add, Professor Fischer's narrative discipline is admirable; many supporting specialist details are left to the extensive (and extremely interesting) appendices.

Professor Fischer also tells a less familiar story, that of the twelve weeks of winter campaigning that followed the initial victories in southern New Jersey. In the little-known "Forage War," Washington fine-tuned his strategy of opportunism. He built upon the activities of local insurgents, who independently harried British and Hessian troops as they ventured out to find fodder for their livestock. In these repeated small engagements, the American forces inflicted extremely heavy casualties and took relatively few themselves, gaining confidence under fire.

By the time the grass greened in the spring of 1777, the British strategy of overawing the colonists and cutting off New England by capturing the middle colonies was in tatters. British and Hessian forces were reduced to less than half their strength of the previous summer, with the heaviest losses in the most experienced units. Lord Howe, the British commander, was forced to ask Whitehall for 20,000 more men in preparation for a general offensive; the already strained government told him to expect only 7,800. For the rest of the war, British operations were hampered by a chronic shortage of troops.

Professor Fischer has a particularly nice eye for the telling detail. Lord Cornwallis, it turns out, was a staunch Whig—as were most of his officers. In fact, while sitting in the House of Lords, Cornwallis had voted against the Declaratory Acts, the legislation that many believe made separation inevitable. Although the British officers were thoroughly trained professionals, they affected the amateurism of British public school culture. In council, for example, Cornwallis called General William Erskine by his old school nickname, "Wooly," while being himself addressed as "My Lord." In a fine particular, Fischer relates, Cornwallis was heard to remark, "Faugh, Faugh! Wooly only wants a junction with Burgoyne that he may crack a bottle with his friend Philips." Lieutenant Colonel Mawhood, who commanded the British column at Princeton, took the conceit even further; he rode to war on a brown pony, with a "pair

1 *Washington's Crossing*, by David Hackett Fischer; Oxford University Press, 554 pages, $34.

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of springing spaniels playing before him." Both he and the spaniels survived the engagement, perhaps because, in the face of such bizarre gallantry, the Americans forebore their usual unsporting practice of shooting at officers.

Indeed, Fischer is especially strong when describing the different cultures of the three armies that met in the winter of 1776 to 1777. Both English and Hessian armies were professional volunteer forces, sharing the values of hierarchy, order, discipline, honor, loyalty, and service. Unlike the British, however, the Hessian officer corps drew on the middle class to lead a largely peasant rank and file. As Professor Fischer thoughtfully observes, they were not mercenaries in the usual sense but, rather, a well-paid army whose services permitted their ruler to reduce taxes and to improve conditions in their otherwise impoverished country. Interestingly, of the Hessian soldiers who survived the war, almost 25 percent chose to stay in America; still more subsequently emigrated to the New World with their families.

The American army itself was a mix of regional cultures and accents, each understanding the principles of liberty and freedom differently, from the individualism of the backcountry riflemen to the collectivism of the old New England militia units and the noblesse of the Virginia Fairfax County contingent. Growing into his command, Washington learned to make decisions by consulting them all; as he said, "A people unused to restraint must be led; they will never be drove." And lead he did, at the front of his troops in the thick of battle, a tall man mounted on a white horse, an easy target, a person of surpassing personal courage and strength—the individual embodiment of the revolution's moral authority.

Throughout the New York campaign, the professional soldiery consistently underestimated the Americans. Professor Fischer argues that this miscalculation carried an enormous strategic cost; in victory the Hessians and British had little to gain, but in defeat they had much to lose. Once they ceded even a few engagements to the army of "peasants," the morale of the officer corps crumbled in mutual recriminations. Forty-five years later, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that "if peace is peculiarly hurtful to democratic armies, war secures advantages for them which no other armies ever possess; and these advantages, which attract little notice at first cannot fail in the end to give them the victory. An aristocratic people, which, fighting against a democracy, does not succeed in bringing it to ruin in the first campaigns always runs a great risk of being defeated by it." Setting himself against a generation of nay-saying revisionists, Professor Fischer's book brings home those democratic advantages with all the gifts of a fine historian's art.

Farrell's achievement

Robert K. Landers An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell. Encounter Books, 562 pages, $28.95

reviewed by Carl Rollyson

This superb biography of James T. Farrell shows why the genre is so vital to an appreciation of literature and the literary life. Farrell is now an overlooked writer. To discover why this is so is to explore how his career played itself out and how literary fashions change, as well as to understand the roles politics, the publishing industry, and literary criticism play in making and breaking writers' reputations.

Born in 1904, Farrell grew up on Chicago's South Side among the Irish who would become the most important characters in his fiction. His father was a teamster who did a reasonably good job of supporting his large family. But Farrell was never close to his father, and he never understood why at the age of two he was shuffled off to his grandparents while the rest of his siblings remained at home.

This separation from home and hearth, so to speak, made the young and sensitive boy

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somewhat of an aloof observer. On one memorable occasion, Farrell's father spotted him walking down the street, and when young Jimmy realized that he was being watched, he ducked out of sight. The biographer reports but does not comment on this incident, although it seems emblematic of Farrell's relationship with his community: He was there to see, not to be seen.

Not that on the face of it Farrell was anything like an estranged youth. Except for his inability to attract the girls he was interested in, Jimmy Farrell was a regular guy—good at sports (baseball, football, and basketball)—but not especially brainy or studious. His main ambition was to become a great baseball player.

Farrell grew up in the Catholic faith, evincing no desire to rebel or to question orthodoxy. He went to Catholic schools, pumped gas that helped fund two years at the University of Chicago, and gave his family part of his earnings. Nothing in his early years suggests Farrell was cut out to be a writer.

Yet his ambition to become someone set him apart from his mates. He was the first in his family to go to college; although the University of Chicago was just blocks away from his home, it was an unusual choice for an Irish lad. But he had decided, after an injury to his knee, that he would never be able to play professional sports. Perhaps, he thought, he could become a lawyer.

While still in high school Farrell had begun writing for the school newspaper. He liked the sense of power and independence associated with speaking his mind. College, he supposed, could help him hone his forensic skills. Then he came under the spell of an English professor, James Weber Linn, who was also a newspaper columnist. Linn did what I wish more English professors would do: He talked about his writing, about how he became a writer, about how hard it had been, and about how he still had a good deal to learn. This approach to teaching writing to young people is far more effective than only relying on the pretense of authority derived from analyzing errors and giving out grades.

But of course the truth is most English professors are not really writers and could not write engaging newspaper columns to save their lives. In fact, most teachers of writing are not writers and therefore cannot interest their students in writing as a living process. But Linn not only taught James T. Farrell that writing is a lifetime commitment, he also published his student's work in his column.

Farrell quit college after two years and went to New York City to become a full-time writer. His first efforts were failures. He returned to Chicago and spent more time at the university. He went to Paris and received encouragement from Ezra Pound. Farrell wrote and wrote and wrote. Eventually the persistent Farrell found a form in which to write about his main subject: why so many of the South Side Irish failed to rise above their squalid environment, instead ending up, like Studs Lonigan, with short and unfulfilled lives, while a few others, like Danny O'Neill and like Farrell himself, were able not only to succeed but to triumph.

I use the word "triumph" advisedly, even though there was never a time when Farrell did not have to sweat for his words, or when even his best work did not receive negative reviews. He triumphed in the sense that he never quit writing and never lost control of his life's ambition or his integrity. This biography honors that effort and redeems even his worst books in the sense that the biographer shows how writing itself was Farrell's lifeline and worth any amount of abuse critics could hand out.

The trouble was that the novel form did not suit Farrell. He did not have the power to shape his story into a single narrative. His forte was the epic, a series of interconnected narratives portraying the lives of the same characters in the same setting. As his most sympathetic critics noted, Farrell's authority was cumulative.

The virtue of this biography is that Landers can weave in and out of Farrell's mas-

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sive oeuvre to show how the Lonigan and O'Neill novels cohere. To appreciate the Farrell effect, then, one would have to read, at a minimum, three novels (the Lonigan trilogy), and to do real justice to Farrell read another five—the O'Neill series. Critics and reviewers have seldom had the patience to read Farrell as an American Balzac, especially when influential critics of Farrell's day—like Edmund Wilson and Alfred Kazin—were conspicuously tired of the all-Irish South Side milieu.

To critics enamored of modernism, Farrell's naturalism seemed stodgy and unsophisticated. To magazines like *The New Republic* and *The Nation*, rife with Stalinist critics, Farrell, a Trotskyite, seemed a heretic. Then, after the success of the Studs Lonigan trilogy—hailed mostly as a piece of literary sociology—reviewers became impatient with Farrell's lengthy and often inelegant books.

Although Landers is Farrell's champion, he does not deny his subject's faults or place the blame for his hero's difficulties solely on the literary or political communities. Reading a Farrell sentence requires an appetite for more wordage than is strictly necessary: "Nothing remained of that past now but scars and wounds, agonies, frustrations, lacerations, sufferings, death." This verbose and earnest style can be very wearing.

Most scholars would concede Farrell's historical importance. He was the first American author to portray the life of an ethnic neighborhood with realistic specificity. He avoided the sentimentality of proletarian fiction and gave a clear sense of the language, the prejudices, and the whole gestalt. Farrell inspired writers like Norman Mailer and Kurt Vonnegut to write about classes of characters and groups that had gone largely unrepresented in American literature.

But the impression lingers that Farrell was a sort of inferior Dreiser, his distinguished predecessor in literary naturalism. While both writers stress the way society shapes individuals, Farrell was more concerned with the quality of the minds a given environment produces rather than with the environment itself. There is relatively little physical description in Farrell, of the environment itself, for he was greatly influenced by James Joyce's stream of consciousness technique, in which the concerns of a society are filtered through individual mentalities.

Nevertheless, Studs Lonigan is clearly kin to Dreiser's Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy* (1925), who has the same romantic longings, seeing in Roberta Alden the ideal representation of womanhood that Studs finds in Lucy Scanlon. Both characters are dogged by the same nebulous and unfounded belief in their own greatness, which is their American tragedy.

Farrell's achievement is comparable not only to *An American Tragedy* but also to *Huckleberry Finn* and to E. L. Doctorow's *Billy Bathgate*. All three novels center on young boys who reject schooling, are attracted to romantic or criminal figures, and evolve as complex products of their society's values even as they apparently rebel against its mores. Each author tries to render American speech realistically, to capture the times their characters inhabit, and to assess the extent to which Americans are capable of achieving the individuality they so prize.

The career of James T. Farrell reminds me of that wonderful sentence in T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "Someone said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know."

Beyond faeryland

R. F. Foster W. B. Yeats: A Life
Volume II: The Arch-Poet, 1915–1939.
Oxford University Press, 798 pages, $45

reviewed by John Simon

The four great twentieth-century anglophone poets are, in my reckoning, Eliot, Graves, Pound, and Yeats, followed by Auden, Cummings, Frost, MacNeice, and

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Ransom. (Stevens and Williams do not speak to me.) Interestingly, the top four had in common the need for a system of belief on which to hang their work and, to a certain extent, their life. For Eliot, this was Anglo-Catholicism; for Graves, the cult of woman as the White Goddess and his various wives and mistresses. For Pound, it became fascism, with its skewed political, racial, and economic notions. Yeats espoused, along with an aristocratic elitism, various forms of occultism, culminating in spiritualism and automatic writing.

Out of fear of mortality and a cognate quest for immortality, Yeats delved into various mythologies, and also created his own. The universe had to involve a system, deducible from history and astrology. Hence his postulation of an Anima Mundi, gyres (cycles), interpenetrating cones of objective and subjective two-aeon periods, and the twenty-eight phases of the moon, revolving between extremes of objectivity and subjectivity, and governing one's life according to which phase one was born in. This required some sleight-of-hand in historical dating, and also impelled Yeats to embrace such movements and people as Theosophy, Madam Blavatsky, Swedenborg, Neo-Platonism, Blake, Bishop Berkeley, Nietzsche, Mohini Chatterjee, Shri Purohit Swami, and other gurus and clairvoyants. This may strike us as ludicrous or pathetic—Auden called it silly; Pound, bughouse—but it did provide an infrastructure for Yeats's poetry. Add to this a fervent elitist belief in the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, to which, as an arriviste, he attached himself, and you have the wherewithal for a Yeatsian psychograph.

That the great poet was largely an autodidact ("I had gone to art school instead of university") contributed to some of his susceptibilities, but there was also a practical undercurrent to his mystical bent that could unexpectedly crop up. Upon being notified by phone of winning the Nobel Prize, his first comment was, "How much . . . how much is it?" He could monitor his expenses meticulously, down to three cents for a newspaper, ten cents for oranges, and carefully list in a diary income from serial publications. Even though he wanted to be a popular poet, he came to resent the success of his earlier poetic and dramatic works at the expense of his later, more demanding ones. Lady Augusta Gregory noted that "a grim expression crossed his face whenever some charming lady gushed about *Land of Heart's Desire* or *Inisfree*." Although he wanted to be variously useful to Ireland, he had mostly contempt for the Irish people. A complicated, often contradictory personality, this William Butler Yeats in his involvements in diverse kinds of cultural, literary, and often plain politics, as well as in passionate romantic entanglements and personal allegiances and enmities.

All these combine to justify R. F. Foster's gigantic *Yeats*. The first volume, *The Apprentice Mage* (640 pages), was reviewed here by Richard Tillinghast ("W. B. Yeats: 'The labyrinth of another's being,'" November 1997); the second is my happy and unhappy task to review herewith. Happy, because Roy Foster has researched tirelessly and written cogently, elegantly, and wittily about all of the life and much of the work; unhappy, because what normal-sized review can begin to do justice to so many tightly packed tall octavo pages?

The Arch-Poet begins with Yeats about to be fifty, and follows closely the quarter-century remaining to him. Some leitmotifs can be pinpointed. There is the intimate but nonromantic friendship with the writer-chatelaine Lady Gregory, and Yeats's love for her home, Coole Park, with a room for him to write in, and the adjoining woods for inspirational rambles. This is behind his championing of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. Antithetically, there is his enduring passion for the beautiful revolutionary, Maud Gonne, only once fleetingly consummated, and his transference of it to Iseult, Maud's comely but flighty daughter, complete with contemplated marriage, though never consummated. Also the growing regret of having given up his affair with the novelist Olivia

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Shakespear for Maud, as expressed in some letters of his lifelong correspondence with Olivia, and in some of his poetry: "One looks back to one's youth as to [a] cup that a madman dying of thirst left half tasted."

Important, too, are William's relations with his family: sister Lilly, an embroiderer and family chronicler in her letters, and Lolly, who ran the Coala Press (which published much of her brother's work) into the ground; brother Jack, the gifted painter; and the profligate father, the painter John Butler Yeats, who later refused to give up his bohemian life in the United States, where he was subsidized by the lawyer and art collector John Quinn in exchange for manuscripts Willy Yeats periodically sent him.

Next, the metaphysical, spiritualist pursuits, which climaxed in Yeats's marriage to George (actually Georgie, but renamed by her husband) Hyde Lees, a woman not very pretty but dependable and practical, and, above all, a good medium. Thus sex and spiritualism would for a while progress *pari passu*, though eventually the highly understanding George, who tolerated and sometimes even encouraged Willy's involvements with other women, sought solace in alcohol. Another recurring motif is the impressive collection of Impressionist paintings owned by Hugh Lane, Lady Gregory's nephew. In a fit of not unjustifiable pique, he had willed them to England. In a last-minute codicil of debatable legal standing, just before going down with the Lusitania, he bequeathed the collection to Ireland, but the British government was unwilling to yield them up, resulting in all kinds of negotiations and intrigues in which Yeats was periodically embroiled.

Then there are the political activities, sympathies, and antipathies, and their role in Yeats's writings. This includes his actions during his years as Senator (an office less influential than the title suggests), mostly of a cultural nature, largely involving struggles against political and religious censorship. Also, later on, his rather ignominious sympathizing with the fascist Blueshirts, for whom he wrote some marching songs, which, however, proved too esoteric to be of much use to those worthies. Also Yeats's ambivalence about the executed Irish rebels of the Easter 1916 uprising, and about other political activists.

Further, the keen sense of regret during his last years at not having had enough love affairs and sex ("I shall be a sinful man to the end, & think upon my deathbed of all the nights I wasted in my youth"), and his intensive attempts to make up for this with various operations and questionable injections, and affairs of uncertain sexual efficacy with a number of mostly much younger women. Hence the treatment with the notorious (and misnamed) "monkey glands" by the highly suspect medical practitioner Norman Haire.

Finally, and most importantly, the works. These include the fascinating but greatly manipulated memoirs, the philosophical and critical writings of uneven quality but never without interest, and the two versions of *A Vision*, Yeats's metaphysical *summa*, each requiring years of gestation but ultimately futile, except as they bear on to his poetry and drama. Relatedly, the joint founding of the Abbey Theater with Lady Gregory and Synge, and being one of its guides through much bitter controversy. This included the writing of numerous plays, mostly in verse and not very actable, and also the producing or rejecting of plays by other writers, often arousing violent clashes in the press and in the theater building whenever Irish puritanism felt provoked. Foster pays laudable attention to the poems and plays, elucidating and assessing key works with sensitive insight.

In pursuing these and some lesser strands with sustained readability and the ability to keep dextrously juggling with so many balls, Foster can lay claim to having executed a heroic task with exemplary aplomb and aptitude. Especially satisfying is the extensive use he makes of letters from, to, or about Yeats, assembled from even some most unlikely sources, often submitted to him by people whom he scrupulously acknowl-

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edges. In both letters and texts, he goes back wherever possible to manuscript originals, and so includes significant bits omitted from the published versions. He explicates whenever necessary, offering his own opinions sparingly but appositely, and is dryly witty in the right places. Above all, he sees his subject's strengths and weaknesses clearly, without any exaggeration or glossing over. I appreciate his quoting Yeats, whose spelling was atrocious and grammar sometimes faulty, exactly as he wrote, for it is comforting to us lesser mortals to see the Achilles heel of genius.

Some of Yeats's misspellings are mostly mundane, e.g., beleive or machanation, but some are spectacular; thus scholour, discrease (for decrease), Guido Renyi, Geothe, Stephen (for Stefan) George, and even Dierdre for his own heroine Deirdre, not to mention such plural misses as fashism and Fachist, and compound ones as prolotariot. But biographer, like biographee, is only human, too, and the good Foster has his lapses as well. It is offputting to find the Carroll Professor of Irish History at Oxford write "Rafferty, whom [sic] WBY decided must be related to Raftery," intriguing (for fascinating), centered around (for on), "Lilly's and Lolly's menage" (for Lilly and Lolly's), masterful (for masterly), "from whence," "the reason was because," and "and nor." Also Gerhard (for Gerhart) Hauptmann, Bertold (for Bertolt) Brecht, and Hannibale (for the Italian Annibale). I am also disturbed by his use of sprezzatura three times in the book; I tend to agree with Marianne Moore that even "*incredible*, *fabulous*, *rapturous*, used more than once in a lifetime, lose force." Troublesome, too, is Foster's referring to various Yeatses by their initials; thus William is always WBY, and his father JBY, which takes getting used to. Lady Gregory is just plain Gregory, which smacks of transgendering, and saves space at the cost of losing grace.

Yet this is more than compensated for by such good writing as this on the automatic writing sessions with George: "What burns through most strongly . . . is the will to believe; and what is hardest to understand is the passionate credulity which lies behind these endless sessions, and would produce the irrational exactness of *A Vision*. . . . But the faith placed in the automatic script draws on another source as well: the need to make sense of his sudden and apparently desperate marriage, indeed to make a triumphant success of it." Foster is very good on tracing George's role in this: "Now the idea of the mythic hero [Cuchulain] as his own alter ego was specifically established. . . . And when George's 'Instructors' [from the Great Beyond] told WBY that Cuchulain's 'Evil Genius' was banished by his rejection of the Hawk Woman, Gonne's surrogate in [Yeats's play] *At the Hawk's Well*, the medium knew exactly what she was doing." Since Yeats was obsessive, "No wonder George was tired. . . . The 'Instructors' often prescribed erotic relations, perhaps to give the medium a respite from her other activities." There was method in the medium's automatism.

George altogether emerges as a sensible and sympathetic character. Thus she remarks that her husband's looking at his early writing "ought to make Willy kind to young poets, some of it is so bad." Even more pointedly, "Just when *A Vision* was being published, she confided to her friend Tom MacGreevy, 'there's nothing in his verse worth treasuring but the personal. All the pseudo-mystico-intellecto-nationalistico stuff of the last fifteen years isn't worth a trouser-button." We read further, "After nearly ten years [the] marriage had subsided into quotidian domesticity, a state less welcome to George than WBY assumed." And further yet, "With the disappearance of her role as spirit-medium, the erotic dimension of their marriage had clearly faded. . . . With [Lennox] Robinson, George went to the cinema, entertained the Drama League, and drank rather too many cocktails." Yet how well she looked after Willy (and, later, their children) in all sorts of ways, even extricating him from the hot water when relationships with other women soured. Her life

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now was "that of helpmeet, secretary, and domestic organizer, no longer muse and mediator." In many respects she was still a collaborator, as on *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, which Yeats was editing, and which, in his befuddlement, he kept calling the Cambridge Book of English Verse. Foster writes, "She was essential to WBY in countless ways, he missed her when away for too long. . . . [a] tough-minded and unsentimental realist . . . in some ways the direction the marriage had gone was not unwelcome to her." After his death, she gave souvenirs of her husband to some of his women, playing "the part of Emer, the understanding wife, to the end."

Foster is very good at discussing and evoking Yeats's various domiciles. The poet wanted, and often had, two residences: one in Ireland, one in England, or one in Dublin, one in the country. The country usually meant County Galway and the vicinity of Lady Gregory's Coole Park. This led to the acquisition of a nearby rather primitive square stone tower and attached cottage, which he named Thoor Ballylee. It stood on an island, and there were problems with furniture and pictures; there were floods, and water also seeped through the walls. But George loved it and did wonders there. Some early Yeats residences were very modest, some later ones—notably in Merrion Square, Dublin—were rather grand. Moreover, English friends and mistresses had houses in England, some quite fancy, where Yeats would stay, often protractedly. The Yeatses also lived in Oxford for a while, but eventually settled in a modest home, complete with chickens, on Dublin's outskirts. Periodically, as various illnesses required a warm climate for William, there were stays in the south of France, either in an apartment or in various hotels.

Yeats's literary friendships and enmities also make colorful reading. Especially so the relationship with Pound, at whose Stone Cottage in Ashburn Forest Yeats lived for a while. This spirited friendship ceased after they disparaged some of each other's works, but was partially renewed years later. There was also a warm nexus with Sean O'Casey, whose Dublin trilogy Yeats successfully produced at the Abbey. But he harshly rejected *The Silver Tassie* (rightly, in my view), which caused a long rift with O'Casey. It was eventually patched up, and the play mounted by the Abbey. A friendship and collaboration with George Moore ended bitterly, with Yeats publishing a screed against Moore. His closest and most enduring literary friend was AE (George Russell), although Yeats did not attend Russell's funeral, for which he later castigated himself. Other more or less close relations included Sturge Moore (whom Yeats called a sheep in sheep's clothing), St. John Gogarty (Joyce's Buck Mulligan; he also was the one who dubbed Yeats the Arch-Poet), Lennox Robinson (a playwright who at times ran the Abbey, and was an unsuccessful suitor of Iseult Gonne), Sean O'Faolain, James Joyce, Bernard Shaw, Padraic Colum, and others, including the artist Edmund Dulac, another close friend, who illustrated books and designed stage productions for Yeats. Several of these friendships followed an up-and-down pattern. Particularly ambivalent—and often hostile—were his relations with the next generation of poets, Auden, MacNeice, etc.; somewhat warmer with Eliot. He liked Lawrence's fiction, and adored Balzac, whose complete works he kept rereading, and who, he said, taught him much about politics and life.

Fascinating, albeit tragicomic, were most of his relations with women in his last years. About a visit to a brothel, he told Montgomery Hyde, "It was terrible. Like putting an oyster in a slot machine." It is not clear how much medicine—or quackery—was able to do for him sexually. With the beautiful but near-crazy twenty-seven-year-old would-be poet and would-be actress Margot Ruddock, it does seem to have been a real relationship, with Margot's irrational shenanigans causing Yeats much embarrassment until Margot was institutionalized. It is hard to say what went on with Ethel

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Mannin, novelist, journalist, feminist, and free spirit, who was to recall that Yeats was "obviously much more romantic than actively sexual." Lady Dorothy Wellesley was a lesbian, but became a good friend, and had a fine estate where Willy often stayed. He included a lot of her undistinguished poetry in his *Oxford Book of English Verse* of which Gogarty was to remark, not without some justification, that "only titled ladies and a few friends were admitted." There were others, too, all young and pretty until, oddly, he settled happily on Edith Shackleton Heald, who was neither. She was variously described as "a wizened, mischief-making spinster," or looking like "a lady's companion." As Foster writes, "While no longer capable of full intercourse, his relationship with Edith was intensely sexual: surviving blurry snapshots show her sunbathing barebreasted . . . under his rapturous gaze." And she was there at the end.

The huge topics I have mostly avoided here are Yeats's poetical and political careers. Foster has so much to say about both, in great detail and with sharp insight—as, for instance, about that splendid poem "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markievicz"—that to do justice to these aspects would have required another review of this length. Let me, however, quote Foster's parting assessment:

> Frederic Prokosch prophetically suggested that *Last Poems* stood in relation to Yeats's earlier work as *Guernica* did to Picasso's youthful clowns and absinthe-drinkers. The comparison might have surprised the poet, who in old age conceived of himself as a classicist; but his work, once seen as so distinctively Irish, was now entering the canon of modern world literature. . . . "A great poet is the antithetical self of his people," WBY had remarked on one of his American tours, "saying truths they have forgotten, bringing up from the depths what they would deny. He is the subconscious self." As usual, he was talking ostensibly about Synge, but really about himself.

Yeats died and was buried in France, World War II preventing burial in Ireland. The account of the rocky path to his post-war reburial there is grotesque enough. The ceremony took place in Sligo, with George, the two Yeats children, Anne and Michael, and brother Jack in attendance. It was September 17, 1948; by year's end, "the country whose consciousness Yeats had done so much to shape, would declare itself a republic."

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Notebook

The strangest travel book ever written

by John Derbyshire

Our dinner guest a few weeks ago got to talking about the thing we always get to talking about with dinner guests, The State of The Culture. He must have been drinking from the well of Evolutionary Psychology, because that is the angle he came at it from. There are (he claimed) tropical cultures and arctic cultures, with intermediate gradations. Human sexual bonding in pure-tropical cultures is of the "grazing" variety: a man hooks up with a woman, impregnates her, then wanders off and repeats the performance with another woman. The women don't mind the looseness of their attachments, because in tropical circumstances food is easy to get, and a woman can raise children without much dependence on men. There are low levels of sexual jealousy, and "low-investment" parenting on the part of males. These males are, as the Evol-Psych jargon goes, "cads" rather than "dads." In pure arctic cultures, by contrast, food can only be got by sustained arduous exertions. The species can only survive in an arctic climate by sticking doggedly together in tight kinship groups, practicing strict monogamy and high-investment parenting.

We in the modern West (our dinner guest argued on) are mostly people with arctic genes trying to adjust to a tropical culture. Not that our climate has changed in a tropical direction, but we have *simulated* a tropical climate by inventing equality of opportunity and the welfare state, in which environment—just as in pre-modern Micronesia or equatorial Africa—women don't really need to have men around in order to raise kids. Instead of food dropping from the trees, it drops from all those well-paid jobs that women now have equal access to—or if all else fails, from the welfare office. All our current social problems flow from this mismatch between our genetic endowment and the environment we have created.

It all sounded pretty plausible as our dinner guest said it, although, having taken in several large glasses of *vin de table*, I couldn't concentrate well enough to think the thing through at the time, to see if this cute little theory really holds water. The main effect this discourse had on me, in fact, was to remind me of a book I heard about some years ago and had always intended to read. The way these things happen, during an idle moment at the keyboard a day or two later, that book came back to mind. I logged on to Abebooks and ordered a copy. The book duly arrived, and I have just finished reading it.

The book is titled *An African in Greenland*. Written about twenty-five years ago, it is the first-person account of a journey undertaken by the author, Tété-Michel Kpomassie, from his home village in West Africa to Upernavik in northern Greenland. Kpomassie's part of Africa is francophone—nowadays the nation of Togo—so the book was written first in French, then translated

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into English by James Kirkup in 1983. (And that 1983 English edition comes with a very silly preface, packed with "post-colonialist" cant, by some vaporing French academic. This is *not* representative of the book. If you get this, you should rip out the stupid preface and stomp on it.) The latest edition of Kirkup's translation, still widely available, was published by The New York Review of Books in 2001.[1] The author seems to have been born around 1941; the period covered by the book is roughly 1957–1968.

Kpomassie was raised in one of the deeply conservative tribal societies bordering the Gulf of Guinea. (His tribe, he tells us, was the Watyi.) In the late 1950s, when the story begins, these people were well acquainted with the modern world, but had embraced only its utilitarian aspects. Kpomassie's father, for example, worked as an electrician, but had five wives. The family scorned Christianity, preferring the ancient animism of their region. After Kpomassie had an unpleasant encounter with a snake, his family elders decided that he was destined to become a priest in a local snake cult. This involved living in the deep jungle among pythons. Kpomassie was not keen on the idea. At just this time, at a bookstore in the nearest city, he happened to see Dr. Robert Gessain's book *The Eskimos from Greenland to Alaska*. Kpomassie was seized with the idea that he should go and live among these folk. By a sustained effort of will, and through many difficulties—it took him six years just to work his way to Europe, two more to get to Greenland—he eventually did so.

It is, as it sounds, the strangest travel book ever written. One can only imagine how the appearance of this tall, very black young African struck the Eskimos of Greenland's tiny, isolated settlements. Kpomassie carries the whole thing off brilliantly. Openminded, self-assured, adaptable, acutely observant, and obviously very personable, he is the perfect guide to the Eskimos and what was left of their culture in the mid-1960s. There is no trace of cultural condescension in him. He has a sort of prelapsarian innocence that gives the book great charm. With that facility for languages that tribal peoples often have, he learned French, German, Danish (Greenland was a Danish colony at the time), and Eskimo. He seems to have been almost entirely self-educated, keeping up correspondence courses while working his way along the West African coast. The dust jacket says that in 1983 he was employed by a Japanese electronics firm in Paris. I have no knowledge of his current whereabouts.

But what about The State of The Culture? Here you surely have what must be the definitive test of my dinner guest's thesis about arctic versus tropical genetic endowments. Well, on the evidence of Kpomassie's book, the thesis is total nonsense. In the matter of sexual morality, for example, the Watyi were not a particularly prudish people, but Kpomassie was shocked by the casual promiscuity of Greenland.

> Gerhart and I went to visit Lydia. [These people with Danish names are all Eskimos, by the way.] "*Assavakit!*" (I love you) she cried when she greeted me. Deeply moved, I stroked her cheek. As we were leaving, she told me: "Come back with Adam this evening at seven." . . . That evening we refused all other invitations. When we got to Lydia's room a little earlier than expected, we saw Karl, Adam's brother, lying naked in the bed beside Lydia! They were drinking beer and laughing. Seeing them lying there side by side, I couldn't help feeling upset. . . . To my astonishment, she didn't understand why I was angry. . . . In Greenland, jealousy is frowned upon. . . . Greenland morality was beginning to disgust me.

These casual morals might have had nothing to do with traditional Eskimo culture. All these Eskimos were Danish citizens, and enjoyed the benefits of a typically generous Scandinavian welfare state. Nobody in

1 *An African in Greenland*, by Tété-Michel Kpomassie; The New York Review of Books, 432 pages, $12.95.

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southern Greenland seemed to do much work, and practically nobody was sober after mid-morning.

> Apart from Eric . . . and one or two others who often left the village on fishing expeditions, none of the people I met seemed to have any definite job. Gerhart trailed me around with him day and night and seemed to do nothing. [Karl] gave me the impression of being a parasite living off his brothers. . . . As for Hans, who supposedly worked at the naval dockyard, not once since my arrival had he gone to work. Yet Paulina was always offering coffee and drinks to visitors. How did she get the money? Well, let's face it: a lot of able-bodied Greenlanders simply live on allowances from the Danish government.
>
> Why is this? Children are sent to school but are not taught anything about their traditional activities. Even worse, their way of life is disparaged to their faces. . . . When they grow up, they can't even paddle a kayak. That's how things are for the Greenlanders on the southern coast. "But are there still places with seal hunters and huskies, sledges and kayaks?" I asked. "*Avannamût*!" (You must go further north!)

So further north Kpomassie goes. There he does indeed find the old way of life still in some kind of existence, and goes hunting for whale, seal, and blue shark, in the traditional style, passing comments on the differences between whale hunting in the arctic and lion hunting on the African plains—Kpomassie must surely be the only person that has ever been qualified to make such comparisons. He finds the sexual morals of the north no stricter than those of the south, though. At the northernmost of his residences, a traditional Eskimo turf house, he slept together with all his host's family in a single bed, for warmth. The family included a girl of twenty who was eight months pregnant. She claimed not to know who the father was, but "village gossip alleged it was her own father."

Kpomassie speaks plainly about the dirt and squalor of Eskimo life, and leaves one with the definite impression that a high level of tolerance for the disgusting is essential for anyone who wishes to dwell among these people.

> All the filth of Christianshåb was suddenly exposed by the sun's return and the thaw. Snow melted on the slopes, the street became a river of mud, and innumerable streams riddled the ash-grey earth and brought to light piles of old bottles and cans, dog shit, household waste, and rotten potatoes. All the garbage which cold and snow had preserved—now swollen with melted water, rotting fast and buzzing with clouds of flies . . . came out to haunt us like a bad conscience. Outside the doors and under the foundations, the houses were repulsively filthy. . . . A sickening stench hung everywhere. The dogs, some of them now moulting, slunk squalidly round the village.

For all the disgust, though, Kpomassie falls deeply in love with the Eskimos and their land, thereby accomplishing what must surely be the most astounding act of cultural assimilation in all of human history.

> More than once, the previous winter, I had driven a dog-sled team alone, perched on my load of frozen fish, often through starry nights swept by the aurora borealis. In those moments of intense cold, with my eyes focused on the track beaten smooth by sleds and my body full of a sense of sweet well-being, I had never missed my native Africa, for the poetry of movement on the ice froze up the muggy heat of my native tropics. I had adapted so well to Greenland that I believed nothing could stop me spending the rest of my days there.

An African in Greenland is a fascinating book, and I could write about it all day. It would, of course, be more economical of your time to just get a copy and read it for yourself, which I urge you to do.

Though it tends to explode my dinner guest's glib little thesis, Kpomassie's book speaks to The State of The Culture nonetheless. Reading it, I found myself thinking

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of my own background, in a way I never quite had before. Born a few years after Kpomassie and raised in an English country town, I am one of the last generation of Westerners to have experienced a culture with strong traditional values. The things I was taught as a child—the hymns and songs and poems, the Latin and geometry and grammar, the street games and rhymes and customs, respect for the Crown, the Church, the Nation, the School, my elders—were much closer to the things my great-grandparents were taught than they are to anything an English child born twenty years after me would have learned.

Kpomassie's upbringing was even more infused with tradition than mine. The words "tradition," "traditional," "custom," and "customary" occur so often when he is writing about his own African culture, in fact, that you start to notice it.

> Each of the wives was periodically omitted . . . because of our father's rigorous observance of certain traditional prohibitions . . .
>
> I was the youngest of the three, so according to custom I was walking in front . . .
>
> Even twins are not exempt from this rule in our traditionalist families . . .
>
> Custom did not lay down the position that [the dog] should occupy on that narrow path, so he often amused himself by scampering off . . .
>
> They didn't dare take me to the hospital, either because it didn't occur to them or because tradition dictated otherwise . . .
>
> At nightfall my father's first wife whom I addressed according to tradition by the respectful title of *Nagan* . . .

My upbringing wasn't as tradition-bound as Kpomassie's, but by the time I reached any kind of social awareness I knew that a question addressed to an adult and beginning with the words "Why should I have to . . . ?" was most likely to be met with a glance of angry puzzlement and the response: "Because that's the way it's done!"

For example: In movie theaters in England in the 1950s, the National Anthem was always played at the end of the movie. Everybody stood up and stayed at attention out of respect to the Monarch until the anthem was over. (There was in fact, by the early 1960s, an unseemly scramble for the exits as the movie came to an end, to avoid having to stand through the Anthem. That only strengthens my point, though; if you hadn't made it out of the theater when the Anthem started, you had to freeze to attention till it was over.)

I can't even imagine people standing still for the National Anthem in a movie theater nowadays—not even in the United States, where patriotism is still strong. In *England*? Forget it! Yet that's the way we were, just forty years ago. As I said, in the matter of tradition and custom, English people of my generation were closer to their great-grandparents than they would be to their own children.

And the break-up of the whole thing was of course my generation's fault. When we reached the age at which we knew everything, at which our minds had penetrated all the way through the deepest mysteries of the universe—which is to say, round about age sixteen—we came to find all that tradition and custom unbearably irksome. We ostentatiously remained seated during the post-movie National Anthem, to much disgust, and sometimes abuse, from older members of the audience. None of that fuddy-duddy hidebound old nonsense for us! I suppose that Kpomassie's misgivings about his predestined career as a snake-cult priest were akin, in some way, to our distaste for the customary ways of midcentury English society.

In his book, Kpomassie draws a melancholy picture of a deserted Eskimo village. It had dawned on the inhabitants one day that they could swap their traditional, very arduous, hunting lifestyle for the much easier fishing-and-welfare ways of the near-

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by town, so they all decamped. I guess the psychology at work there was similar in some way to Kpomassie's balking at becoming a snake-cult priest or to my staying seated through "God Save the Queen."

Flipping through some internet sites to see what has happened to the Greenland Eskimos in the thirty-odd years since Kpomassie left them, I find no good news.

> Many of the Eskimo (Inuit) people survive by hunting and fishing and are struggling as fish stocks become depleted. [Greenland's] population is only 56,000. Inhabitants face severe social problems, notably unemployment, alcoholism and rates of AIDS infection.
>
> —BBC News

You could argue that even this is for the best. The traditional Eskimo life was awfully hard, especially on the old. (The ice floe business you have heard about is not quite true, but something similar went on. Kpomassie is very eloquent about the reverence given to old people in his African tribe, as against the "useless mouths" attitude that seems to have prevailed among the Eskimos.)

I doubt things are going much better with the traditional West African society Kpomassie was raised in. My guess is that it has been smashed to pieces by combined assaults from the international-aid bureaucracies, the rapacity of French industrialists and politicians, and misrule by Sorbonne-educated African intellectuals, steeped—like all modern intellectuals—in a deep contempt and loathing for ordinary people, for their traditions and customs and folkways, their beliefs and attitudes, their tastes and preferences, their religion and ethnic loyalties.

What happened to the Eskimos and the Watyi has also happened to us in some degree. My kids don't play the street games we used to play (some of which, according to Peter and Iona Opie's classic *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, go back to Roman times), because they are too busy on the computer. Reverence for the Flag, the Country, the Church, the School, the Family? But these are just human institutions, staffed by ordinary fallible human beings, who frequently behave in ridiculous ways. What's to reverence? We seem to have actually lost some conceptual power, the power to see past individual persons to the institutions they represent. Perhaps this is the final triumph of individualism.

There is, of course, a case to be made for this great transformation. Quite possibly we, if not the Eskimos and Watyi, have gained more than we have lost. Those old traditional folkways were not all benign. (Kpomassie hints at human sacrifice—not among his own people, but in a neighboring tribe.) To an intelligent and imaginative young person—me, Kpomassie, no doubt many Eskimos—the weight of custom and tradition can be intolerably suffocating, the urge to kick against it, or escape from it, irresistible.

Still, when we escaped from all that, we at least understood that we *had* lost something, and this is a thing that the following generations do not know. "Why should I have to . . . ?" No reason, really, none that stands up to rigorous logical scrutiny. So don't, if you don't feel like it. Those who know about and care about nothing at all that is old, traditional or customary are adrift and aimless in a blank, nihilistic, hedonistic world, in which nothing matters much because everything is permitted. How I pity them!

Is modern Western culture really anything more than just a better furnished version of the booze-sodden, AIDS-addled, traditionless, pointless existence of the modern Greenlanders? I don't know, I just wonder. I am sure that Tété-Michel Kpomassie, wherever he is, wonders the same thing. So, probably, do a few Eskimos. What a wonderful book, to make a person think so much!

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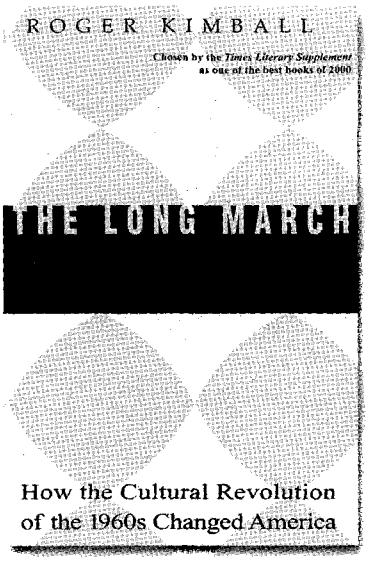
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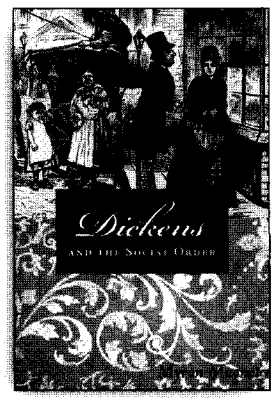

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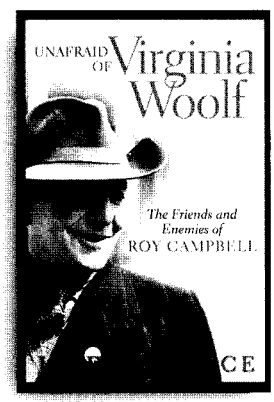

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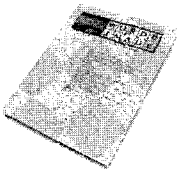

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